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SHE LEANED AGAINST THE OLD UNUSED WELL, A GRACEFUL FIGURE
IN THE SUNSHINE *Page 1*

The Randy Books

RANDY AND PRUE

BY

AMY BROOKS

Author of "Randy's Summer," "Randy's Winter," "Randy
and Her Friends," "A Jolly Cat Tale," "Dorothy
Dainty," "Dorothy's Playmates"

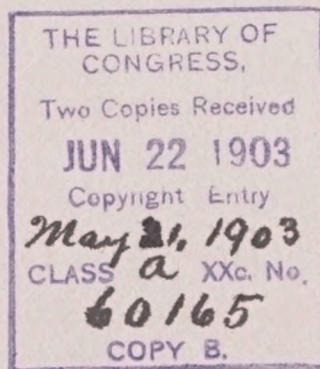
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



BOSTON
LEE AND SHEPARD
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RANDY AND PRUE

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RANDY AND PRUE

CHAPTER I

A MORNING CALL

THE soft breeze whispered in the leaves overhead; here and there a buttercup nodded in the grass, and in the garden the sunflowers raised their great heads, inviting the bees to give them a share of the homage paid the petunias and nasturtiums.

Randy Weston watched the butterflies at play in the sun, and smiled when one gorgeous fellow poised upon a red petunia, which in the gentle breeze swayed like a fairy cradle.

She leaned against the old unused well, a graceful figure in the sunshine, and "an ornament ter the place," as Jabez Brimblecom remarked as he turned again to look at Randy, who was wholly unaware that he

was passing. In her hand she held a letter, and a smile parted her red lips as she thought of the writer.

"Just three weeks to wait, and then she will be here, and mother will see that Nina Irwin is every bit as sweet as I have declared her to be. To think that a city girl should so eagerly anticipate a visit to our farm! *Now* I know that she cares for me truly, and her visit to us shall be, if possible, even more charming than she imagines."

"Oh, Randy, Randy!" called a childish treble, "have you written to the Nina girl yet?"

"Why, no," said Randy, "I've only just received her letter."

Quite out of breath, Prue now stood beside her sister, and looking eagerly up into her face she said:

"Well, when you do write, tell her I'll *truly* be her little sister while she's here."

"I'll let you print it, and send it inclosed in my letter," said Randy, as she drew Prue closer.

“Oh, oh, *may* I print it myself? Oh, I love you, Randy; you always let me do things.”

Randy laughed merrily.

“I should think everyone ‘lets you do things,’” said she. “Yesterday mother allowed you to water the plants in the garden, and you drowned some of them, I think. Father lets you drive Snowfoot until he sees that we are about to ride into the side of a house, or over a stone wall, and old Mrs. McLeod, when you run in to see her, lets you play with her knitting until you have dropped all of her stitches.”

“Now, Randy,” Prue exclaimed, “those things did themselves. I drive just as straight as anybody does, but sometimes Snowfoot doesn’t know which way to go, and nobody could keep knitting-stitches on the needles. The needles is too slippery, that’s all.”

Small wonder that Randy laughed at this unique explanation.

“Randy,” said Prue, her little face wear-

ing a very serious expression, "Randy, those kittens of Tabby's hasn't any names yet, but I'm goin' to christen 'em to-morrow, and I've just thought what to name 'em. I'm goin' to call the gray and white one Fluffy. I think that will do for her, she's so woolly, but the brindle one I shall name Orlando Steubenreiser, after that big man we saw at the mill last week. He's so very big and splendid lookin', and I want my kitten to be a *monst'ous* cat."

"But that is a queer name for a little kitten," said Randy, with difficulty hiding her mirth.

"No, 't isn't queer," persisted Prue; "the big man looked fine, and I shall name my kitten for him, and we must all call the kitten by it when we want it to come in."

"Well, if we do not get our tongues twisted in the effort, I think we shall be lucky," said Randy.

At the end of the long garden bed stood Mrs. Weston and Mrs. Hodgkins, engaged in animated conversation.

“ I tell ye, Mis’ Weston, she’s got as many whims as there’s seeds in one er them sun-flowers, an’ she’s ter spend the hull summer ter Mis’ Brimblecom’s. Why, whatever do ye think her last notion is? ” queried Mrs. Hodgkins.

“ But there, ye couldn’t guess in a month, so I’ll tell ye. Sabriny told Mis’ Brimblecom that rainwater ketched in a white chany bowl is nec’sary ter her complexion, an’ the last thunderstorm she fairly drove Jabez aout ter the corner er the haouse, an’ she stood at the winder a-watchin’ him while he held the bowl aout ter ketch the drops, an’ tried with the other hand ter keep his ambrill over his head.

“ He’s awful ’fraid er thunder, bein’s he was struck once, an’ every time a big clap would come, he’d jump like a skittish hoss. Then Sabriny at the window would squeal:

“ ‘ Oh, Jabez, Jabez! You’re a-spillin’ the water,’ while Mis’ Brimblecom, at the door, would holler:

“ ‘ Naow, Jabez, keep that ambrill over yer

head unless ye hanker fer a spell er rheumatiz,' until Mr. Brimblecom was 'baout wild. He stood it like a major until a tremendous thunderclap made him jump up straight, an' in his fright daown went the bowl.

" 'Oh, you've spilled all the water you'd ketched,' said Sabriny, an' fer once Mis' Brimblecom lost her patience.

" 'More like he's broke my bran' new bowl,' said she. Jabez was even madder.

" 'Jiminy ginger!' says he, 'I'm clean petered aout, an' I do'no's I'd a cared ef I'd smashed *two* bowls.' An' he stamped inter the haouse an' took daown the almanic ter see when ter expect fair weather, or ter let 'em see 't he wasn't in er mood fer talkin'."

"Why didn't they dip some water from the rainwater barrel?" asked Mrs. Weston; "there is always one standin' at the corner."

"An' no wonder ye ask," replied Mrs. Hodgkins, "but the fact is, that Sabriny wouldn't have no water that came from a spaout. She declared 'twas contam'nated,

and said she must have it ketched straight from the heavens. All er Jabez's folks, as fur back as he remembers, has reg'larly riz at five o'clock, but Sabriny says that durin' her stay she won't be able ter git up till nine. Ain't it outrageous? I tell Mis' Brimblecom I wouldn't stand it, even 'lowin' that she is Jabez's cousin."

"It certainly does make it hard fer Jabez and his wife," said Mrs. Weston.

"Sabriny started aout the other day ter make a few calls," Mrs. Hodgkins continued. "As she went aout the door she looked back, an' says she, 'I expect to be back in time ter have dinner at six,' an' with that she went daown the path as if she owned the place. She wants all the winders shet, no matter haow hot the night is, because she says she's subjic ter pneumony, an' every week, on bakin' day, she says the kitchin fire makes her reel faint. Mis' Brimblecom spoke her mind the last time Sabriny complained er the fire.

"'Sabriny,' says she, 'I'm thinkin' ye'd

feel a deal fainter ef I should give up cookin' an' put aout the fire,' an' Sabriny kept kinder still after that, fer she's what ye might call a powerful eater, ef she does pretend ter bein' delicate. She says naow, that the air up here is a-doin' her so much good that she may decide ter stay inter the fall, an' Jabez says that's more discouragin' than a plague er grasshoppers.

"He says he can fight bugs with a club er with pizen, but there ain't no doin' anything ter rid the farm er Sabriny ef she's detarmined ter stay.

"Last week Sabriny came aout in a new gaown. She called it a *tea*-gaown, but I do'no why, fer 't wa'n't tea-colored, 'twas 'baout the color er laylocks; she didn't wear it ter drink tea in, fer they don't hev tea er supper at Jabez's naow. Sabriny told Mis' Brimblecom that she'd have ter have dinner at six. Jabez has dinner at twelve, 'cause he an' the farm-hands is hungry at that time, an' Sabriny seems ter be ready too, so while she's a-tellin' haow delicate she is, she's

a-eatin' three hearty meals a day, with goodness knows haow many lunches between.

"She has ter have an egg before breakfast ter keep up her stren'th, an' a glass er cream at bedtime ter make her sleep, an' cookies an' doughnuts between meals ter pervent her faintin', an' Jabez says he sometimes thinks er buildin' on an ell ter make room fer a new larder.

"He says she's more expensive ter keep than any hearty farm-hand he ever see, an' says that ef we hear that his farm is mortgaged again we'll all know haow it happened. He's baound ter hev his little joke about it, an' Mis' Brimblecom tries ter make the best on't, but it's pretty hard ter work fer Sabriny, an' she not willin' ter lift her finger ter help. Wal, she ain't a-visitin' me, so I needn't take on so, but I think er deal er Mis' Brimblecom an' Jabez, an' I'm sorry fer 'em."

"It makes hard work fer Mrs. Brimblecom," said Mrs. Weston, "and she hasn't a daughter like Randy ter help her. It seems

as if Randy could not do enough fer me since she came home. Spendin' all last winter in the city at Miss Dayton's fine house seems only ter have made her more fond of her own home, an' she an' Prue are just inseparable.

"Ef Randy sweeps, little Prue takes the duster; when Randy wipes dishes, Prue runs to put them away. She's willin' ter do anything that 'll let her be close ter Randy. Jest see them there by the old well, Mis' Hodgkins; they're blessings, ef I do say it."

Mrs. Hodgkins turned, and shading her eyes with her hand, looked fixedly at the two figures, upon which the sunlight lovingly rested.

Prue was gayly chattering, while Randy was in the act of fastening a cluster of buttercups securely among her little sister's curls.

There were tears in Mrs. Hodgkins' eyes as she turned to speak.

"I hope they'll always be as lovin' as they

be naow. Time changes the dispositions of some, an' some it doesn't, but seems 's if Randy an' Prue would remain lovin' always."

"I trust—oh, I know—that they will," said the mother. "Randy is steadfast, an' Prue is clingin'. They'll always love each other. 'Twill be more an' more—not less."

"I believe ye," said Mrs. Hodgkins. "Wal, I've spent a lot er time with ye this mornin', Mis' Weston, an' who's more neighborly 'n I be? My work's standin' still, an' so's yourn, so I'll be goin', jist askin' ye ter run in when ye can," and having given this invitation, she hastened toward home, stopping at Mrs. Brimblecom's on the way to hear of any new freak which her visitor might have exhibited.

Mrs. Hodgkins was a good woman, and also a persistent gatherer and dispenser of news, and she lost no opportunity to glean a fragment of gossip, which in all haste she repeated to the first person she chanced to meet.

When she reached Mrs. Brimblecom's door she found the visitor, Mrs. Sabriny Boardman, arrayed in a be-ruffled pink muslin, and rocking luxuriously in a large splint chair in the dooryard. She was wielding a fan, and as Mrs. Hodgkins bade her "good-morning" she sighed, and in a lazy drawl complained of the heat.

"Yes, it's hot," Mrs. Hodgkins agreed, "but I guess Mis' Brimblecom feels it more 'n you do, bein's she's ironin' in the kitchen."

"Oh, the kitchen is insufferably hot," Mrs. Boardman replied, "but Jabez's wife's used to such work, and that makes a difference."

This was too much for Mrs. Hodgkins' patience.

"Wal, of all things!" she ejaculated, her face plainly showing her disgust. "'Tain't so many years ago, Mis' Boardman, sence ye was Sabriny Brimblecom, an' many's the time I've known ye ter work at the churn the hull forenoon, help yer aunt that ye

lived with git dinner fer twelve hired men, an' set daown an' take a hand at a big basketful er mendin' that kept ye busy 'til bed-time.

"Then up ye'd git at half-past four the next mornin', an' mebbe it would be bakin' day, an' mebbe it would be sweepin', but whatever 'twas, 'twas *work*, an' ye well know haow ter do it, an' I must say, I'm riled ter hev yer come back here ter visit an' represent ter us that ye don't hev the fust idee *haow* ter do the work that ye've allus done 'long with the rest of us.

"Ef ye've done all ye want ter of it, I don't feel cause ter blame ye, fer I guess most er the women hereabaouts could be contented with a leetle less work; but ye know *haow* ter do it—ye needn't say ye don't."

"I think ye're rather blunt," whined Sabriny.

"Wal, I didn't mean ter be hard on ye, but I will call a spade a spade, an' I ain't called upon ter b'lieve ye've fergot haow ter

work on er farm the minute ye see Boston."

Sabriny declared herself to be "all upset," and Mrs. Hodgkins, after dryly remarking, "Wal, I'll leave ye ter collect yerself," walked into the kitchen to condole with Mrs. Brimblecom.

Yes, she was ironing as her visitor had said, but her mind was not upon her work, and her iron moved mechanically back and forth across a pillow-case, regardless that it was already smooth.

"Wal, Mis' Hodgkins, I'm glad ter see ye. My mind's all took up with Deacon Lawton's new stoop.

"What! ye haven't heerd 'baout it? Wal, I guess this is the only time I ever heard a piece er news fust.

"Yes, the deacon's goin' ter hev a new stoop ter his house, an' when that's done the hull haouse 'll be painted yaller. There's goin' ter be four steps up ter the stoop an' a railin' raound it. Some say it's kind er worldly in the deacon ter fix up so, but I

do'no why a deacon shouldn't hev a good-lookin' haouse as well as anyone else," said Mrs. Brimblecom.

"As long's he's got money 'nough ter pay fer it, I do'no why he shouldn't hev it," said Mrs. Hodgkins; "but do ye mean a stoop, or a verandy?"

"Wal, I do'no," answered Mrs. Brimblecom, an expression of doubt in her eyes.

"The deacon's wife calls it a stoop, an' anyway, I'll say this, that whatever 'tis, it's ter hev a railin' raound it, an' they do say that Deacon Lawton's haouse 'll be a thing wuth travelin' fer miles ter see when he gits it fixed."

Then, moving nearer, she whispered, "Ye didn't vex Sabriny, did ye? I thought she looked kind er put aout when I glanced that way jist naow."

"Be ye 'fraid er givin' 'fense?" asked Mrs. Hodgkins, in surprise.

"I ain't exactly '*fraid*,'" Mrs. Brimblecom answered, "but she's what ye call 'difficult,' an' 'fendin her would make it wuss.

She's got her good p'int's like the rest of us. She's good-natured."

"*Good-natured!*" muttered Mrs. Hodgkins; "wal, I should think she *might* be, with you 'n Jabez a-waitin' on her by inches. I fairly expect ter run in some day an' ketch ye a-feedin' her with a spoon, ter save her the effort of feedin' herself."

"Wal, I don't want ter say anything whilst she's my visitor," was the gentle answer, "but I shan't invite a batch er comp'ny ter 'rive the minute she departs fer fear I'll be lonesome, fer I'm so tired that I think Jabez an' I could git erlong fer a month without another soul ter speak ter."

Just at this point Sabriny, remarking that the sun was too high for comfort, entered the room and immediately complained of the heat, and Mrs. Hodgkins, curtly saying "I'll bid ye good-mornin'," hurried away, her heart filled with disgust for the selfish visitor, and with a deal of sympathy for Mrs. Brimblecom.

As she hastened along the dusty road her

mind was filled with a variety of thoughts, and when at the cross-roads she met her neighbor, Mrs. Jenks, she was about to tell her of her exasperation with Jabez Brimblecom's guest, but Mrs. Jenks was anxious to tell what was uppermost in *her* mind, and as she chanced to say the first word, she held her position as speaker.

“ There's a story goin' raound taown that Barnes' store is ter hev a big, new winder in place er the old one, an' ye know Janie Clifton has had her dressmakin' an' mil'nery over the store fer a year? Wal, they say Barnes is goin' ter show some er Janie's hats an' bunnits in the new winder on er wax figger. Don't that beat all! I don't buy my summer bunnit 'til I see that display, no matter haow long I hev ter wait.

“ An' let me tell ye the greatest yet! Ye know that old, dilap'dated hoss-trough by the willer tree in the square? Of course ye do, an' so does anybody fer miles raound. Wal, old Sandy McLeod has given a *stun* trough, land knows what it 'll cost, an' it's

ter be set in place in time fer the Fourth er July; kinder celebratin' like. Naow, I call that generous. The old wooden trough has been there fer years, waterlogged an' moss-covered, an' nobody's thought er placin' a better one. What's anybody's job isn't apt ter be 'tended to, an' I say again that Sandy McLeod's a fine old man ter give us the new trough of his own accord.

"Nobody would er thought of hintin' fer it, but he doesn't wait fer hints, save those his dear old wife gives him. What a lovin' old couple they be! I never see a sweeter face than Margaret McLeod's, an' as fer Sandy, a sight er his twinklin' eyes would make the crabbedest critter smile."

"Wal, Mis' Jenks, I guess anyone will agree with ye, fer the McLeods are mighty pop'lar in the taown, an' speakin' fer myself, I think the world er them. But the news ye had ter tell beats anything.

"A mil'nery show, an' a new hoss-trough! I wonder what next?" said Mrs. Hodgkins, and she mentally resolved that immediately

after dinner the wonderful news should be sent on its way about the town, and she would be the one to give it a vigorous start.

Still by the old well Randy and Prue lingered, Randy watching the bees as they hovered about the morning glories, Prue asking for yet another story.

“Tell me ’gain ’bout the beautiful lady what singed at the concert,” she pleaded, and again Randy told of the prima donna’s sweet voice, little Prue listening with eager eyes, as intent to catch each detail as if Randy for the first time was describing it. And Randy told the story faithfully. She had known the joy of listening to the witching music; then she would give little Prue a perfect description that should give her a share in the pleasure, for next best to hearing the music, Prue reasoned, was to hear about it.

CHAPTER II

A WELCOME GUEST

“AN’ ye say she’s not a bit haughty?” queried Aunt Prudence, as, with her lips set in a peculiar pucker, she proceeded to tuck the upper crust of an apple pie securely in place, and then with a fork to crimp the edge into subjection. No pie crust which Aunt Prudence Weston had handled ever presumed to slip from the edge of the plate upon which she had placed it.

“Haughty?” said Randy. “No, *indeed*, Aunt Prudence. Nina Irwin is bright and sweet, and has what Miss Dayton calls a ‘pretty dignity,’ but she’s not a bit haughty, and you will say so when you see her. She’s a girl whom all the other girls like and admire; she is full of fun, but I’ll tell you one thing that I noticed as soon as I became acquainted with her.

“She is witty, and often at school kept us all laughing at her bright speeches, but she never says a sharp word to anyone, nor makes a joke at another’s expense, and once when one of the girls made an unkind remark about another’s dress, you should have seen Nina. She turned and looked at the speaker with such scorn that the girl blushed, and I know felt ashamed. After a pause Nina said:

“ ‘I’ve never noticed her clothing; I have always been so busy admiring her that I’ve not found time to criticise her frocks, but one thing about her always seemed conspicuous to me. She never says unpleasant things of anyone.’

“We all loved Nina for her brave words, for Therese Eames could be very unpleasant when she chose, and few of the girls at the school would have cared to offend her.”

Aunt Prudence was interested. “How did it turn out?” she asked.

“That’s the strangest part of it,” said Randy. “Therese looked at Nina for a mo-

ment, and then, without saying a word, she turned and walked away. Afterward she joined us, and looking straight at Nina she said:

“‘I didn’t intend to be mean when I spoke as I did a few minutes ago. I was only amused at the odd style of the gown which I criticised, and I didn’t stop to think how it sounded to speak as I did. Indeed I did not mean to be unkind.’

“And do you know she didn’t say a word about anyone during the rest of the term that could be called harsh or cruel.”

Aunt Prudence placed the pies in the oven, and energetically closed the door.

“I still say I look forward ter meetin’ yer friend Nina,” she remarked.

“Me too, me too,” cried Prue; “I want the Nina girl to come. Somebody give me a teenty piece of crust to make a little pie with; I want to bake it in my dolly’s wash bowl.”

“Naow, Prue, you run away an’ play with yer two little kittens,” said Aunt Prudence.

“No, no, I can’t play with those kittens now. I got to make a pie for the Nina girl, and bake it in my dolly’s wash bowl,” cried Prue, excitedly.

“Wal, I’ve heared er queer dishes before naow,” remarked Aunt Prudence, dryly, “but I must say I never heared of offering ‘wash-bowl’ pies to comp’ny. Here, Prue, you can hev this bit er crust on the end er the table, but I advise ye ter eat the pie when it’s done instead er savin’ it fer Miss Nina. She might not take ter it.”

“You don’t any of you know how nice it will be,” said Prue. “I’m going to put lots of things in it ’sides apple, and when the Nina girl eats it she’ll say she never tasted anything like it before.”

“Wal, I guess likely she will,” said Aunt Prudence, with a laugh, in which Randy joined; but little Prue considered their merriment uncalled for, and again assured them that her wash-bowl pie was to be a very fine thing.

Mrs. Weston was occupied in renovating

the spare room, and out in the dooryard a farm-hand was energetically washing the wagon which later in the day would convey Nina from the depot to the house. Randy was helping Aunt Prudence, and even Tabby seemed to know that an honored guest was expected, for close by the range she lay and washed her own sleek coat and the soft fur of her two pretty kittens as if determined to present as fine an appearance as possible.

At the table little Prue decorated her "wash-bowl pie" with bits of crust which she twisted into odd little knobs, and forcibly pressed them in place.

"See these lovely balls on top of my pie, Tabby," she cried; "crust balls, just to make it look pretty—no, no, you mustn't put your nose on it. It's got to be baked 'fore it can be eaten, an' when it's done the Nina girl will eat it. Don't you mind, Tabby, darling, if you an' your kittens doesn't get the pie; you shall have a saucer of milk.

"Oh, Randy Randy!" she cried, as Randy stooped to the oven to see if the pies were

browning. "Please put my little pie where it will get baked real brown, an' then tell me which of these kittens is a blonze, an' which is a blunette."

Randy nearly dropped the pie which she was turning, and when she had closed the oven door she sat down upon the braided mat beside Tabby and laughed until her eyes were filled with tears.

"Oh, Prue," she cried, "what will you say next?"

"Well, 'tain't funny," said Prue, as she looked at Randy in mild astonishment.

"Hez'kiah Blunt was helpin' 'round the barn the other day when I had those kittens out in my little wagon, an' he said, 'One er them ere kittens is a blonze an' t'other is a blunette, Miss Prue;' he *did*, truly, an' now I want to know which. Well, why is it so funny? Do please stop laughing while I tell you.

"The gray and white one is 'most all white, an' that's the one I think he called the blonze"—Randy was shaking with ill-

suppressed merriment—"and the brindle one, you 'member his name's Orlando Steubenreiser, must be the blunette, 'cause he's so much darker."

Randy turned and affected to be minutely examining the brindle kitten.

"I think he *must* be the 'blunette,'" she said, and she hurried away to tell her mother of Prue's funniest saying.

With the bustle of preparation the sunny day wore on, until the clock hands pointed to quarter of five.

Mrs. Weston, wearing her best gown and white apron; Aunt Prudence in her chair at the window, and little Prue on the door-stone, her kittens in her lap, awaited Nina Irwin's coming with varied sensations of expectation.

Mrs. Weston felt sure that the girl whom Randy and Helen Dayton admired must be a paragon. Aunt Prudence hoped that Miss Nina was "all she was cracked up to be," and Prue in her loving little heart believed that the "Nina girl" was little less

than an angel, since she was the original of the charming photograph which Randy possessed.

Randy and her father had started early for their drive to the Centre, and they drew up at the station five minutes before the train was due.

“Oh, father,” said Randy, “I’m like Prue. I’m wondering if the ‘Nina girl’ will ever come.”

“Wal, I may as well admit, I feel that way myself,” said Mr. Weston, with a laugh.

At last, with a shriek, the train appeared around the bend, and slowed down to stop before the little station. Two or three staid passengers alighted. “You don’t suppose she couldn’t come, do you, father? Oh, there she is!”

“Oh, Nina, Nina, here we are, just wild to see you, and wondering if anything had prevented your coming.”

Mr. Weston had known of Randy’s love for Nina, and one look into her dark eyes

as she stood with her arm about Randy convinced him that Randy's affection was fully returned.

"This is Nina Irwin, father. Nina, this is the dear father of whom you have heard so much."

"I'm pleased to meet ye, Miss Nina, truly pleased; and ye'll find three new friends up at the farm that 'll have the fidgets if I don't arrive with ye the minute ye're expected."

"I cannot begin to tell you how I have anticipated this visit," said Nina. "I have never been on a farm before, although I have always thought it would give me rare pleasure to spend a part of a summer in the country and away from the gay life at the hotels. The winter is full of excitement; I like a bit of quiet happiness when summer comes."

"It's quiet 'nough up our way," said Mr. Weston, "but I guess Randy an' Prue can contrive ter keep ye awake."

"Oh, Randy is the very best of company," Nina replied, "and from what she has told

me of her little sister's doings and cute sayings, I think that Prue must be a little host in herself."

"Prue is a team," said Mr. Weston, with a laugh, "an' now, Miss Nina," he continued, "jest look this way a minute, an' say ef ye ever saw a prettier sight."

Nina turned, and a cry of delight escaped her lips. At the right of the road, a rocky field, with here and there a stunted little bush, seemed the least tempting pasture imaginable, yet a flock of sheep and lambs were grazing, moving in little groups, and nipping at the short grass. Near the wall which divided the pasture from the road, a young lamb had strayed from the flock, but the sound of the wagon wheels sent the timid little creature bleating to its mother, where, huddled close beside her, it ventured to look back.

"Oh, the cunning things," cried Nina. "How blue the sky looks above the pasture, and the sunlight! See the long shadows which follow the sheep as they move about."

"Wal, we'll be drivin' along, fer the folks at home are anxious ter see ye, Miss Nina, an' the sheep are here ter be looked at every day. Ye'll find that ye can make friends with the critters as soon as they learn that ye mean ter be gentle with 'em."

"I'll lose no time in reassuring them," said Nina.

The drive over the long shady road, with Randy's sweet eyes resting lovingly upon her, filled Nina with an assurance of her welcome. As they turned in at the driveway little Prue promptly dropped the kittens and shouting gayly, "They've come, they've come, and brought the Nina girl," she danced toward them, her eyes shining, and her short curls flying.

"Yes, the Nina girl has come," said Nina, laughing, "and you I know are Randy's little Prue."

"And yours, too," Prue answered, "*your* little Prue, if you want me. I telled Randy to say in her letter that I'd be your little sister, 'cause you haven't got one."

Nina stooped to kiss the sweet, wistful face as she said, "I've come all the way from Boston to find a big sister Randy and a little sister Prue."

Mrs. Weston appeared in the doorway, followed by Aunt Prudence, and Randy led Nina forward. Mrs. Weston hastened toward her, saying:

"Why, Miss Nina, we wondered if the train was late, or if something prevented yer comin'. We're glad ter see ye, an' we should all have been dis'pointed if ye'd been delayed in comin'. Come right in an' see—— Oh, here she is, as usual, at my right hand. Miss Nina, this is——"

"Yer Aunt Prudence, I'm aunt ter these two girls, an' I think I need another niece. Jest call me Aunt Prudence, as they do, and ye'll please me."

"Indeed I will," Nina answered, a bright tear upon her lashes. "I feel at home already, and if you will all call me Nina, instead of Miss Nina, I shall feel that this is just a second home which I have found."

"You can play wiv my two kittens all the time, if you want to," said Prue, as she ran in and deposited her pets in Nina's lap. Then away she ran to reappear in the doorway with Tabby in her arms.

"And this is Tabby," she cried, "the mother of those lovely kittens."

Nina could not help laughing, as Prue stood at the door, holding Tabby firmly, that all her good points might be seen before she could escape.

"Our visitor hasn't seen the cows yet, Prue; are ye goin' ter bring *them* in ter be looked at?" asked Mr. Weston, and Prue answered promptly:

"Why, no, they're too big; but I guess you could bring the pretty calf in. There's room 'nough for him in here."

Just then Mrs. Weston announced that tea was ready, and Prue decided to wait until the next morning to exhibit the calf.

The absence of servants did not disturb Nina Irwin. The table set with its white cloth and laden with wholesome country

fare seemed wonderfully tempting, and the atmosphere of frank, outspoken kindness, the loving regard with which each member of the family held the others, filled her with a restful content, and a happy little sigh escaped her lips.

“Are you very tired, Nina?” asked Randy, gently laying her hand upon Nina’s arm.

“Yes, a little tired,” answered Nina, “but that was not what made me take a long breath. I was just thinking that I had been rushing about all winter, and that I had come to this lovely place, had found new friends, and that while I stay I need not hurry about anything. The idea of such a restful visit made me catch my breath, and wonder if it were really true.”

“It doesn’t ever make me tired to rush,” declared Prue. “I rush everywhere.”

“An’ ye might add, keep the rest of us rushin’ ter see what ye’re up ter,” said Aunt Prudence, with a laugh, in which the others joined.

That night Nina and Randy talked of the day on which they had first met at Miss Helen Dayton's lovely home in Boston, of their school-days during that winter, of the joys of this visit to Randy's home, and Nina dropped to sleep while thinking of the flock of sheep which she had seen during the drive from the station.

CHAPTER III

AN ENCHANTED MILL-POND

“ I NEVER saw a spot so lovely,” exclaimed Nina Irwin, as she stood beside Randy on the margin of the mill-pond and looked off across the shimmering water to watch with admiration the rhythmic dipping of the oars as Jotham came toward them in his new boat, *The Randy*.

Two weeks of Nina’s visit had sped as if on wings, and Randy and Jotham had vied with each other in planning little pleasure-trips which would show her the beauties of their country home. She had seen the pond many times when driving along the shady old mill road with Randy, but it possessed charms which to-day she saw for the first time.

At one side a row of ancient willows leaned toward the water and were mirrored

there. On the opposite side wild shrubbery formed a rambling hedge, over which one could see young alders with their thick, dark foliage.

Lily pads there were in little colonies, and lilies, too, if one might only reach them.

And now Jotham was near enough to see their eager faces, and to assure them that the lilies on the further side of the pond were larger than any which they had yet seen. Very gallantly Jotham assisted his fair passengers to their places in his "barge," as he laughingly called it.

"Oh, call it a gondola," said Nina, "that will sound even more romantic, and we will call the pond the lagoon. Whatever we call it," she continued, "there was never a place more lovely. See the deep shadows under the willows——"

"Where the nixies is," cried Prue, as if completing the sentence. "Nina, do you believe there *isn't* nixies?"

"Why, Prue," said Nina, "why don't you tell us what *you* believe?"



1958 8

"Well," said the little girl gravely, "when I'm in the house with my fairy book, I 'most always don't b'lieve it, but when I look down, down in the water, where the shadows is all dark, and cool, and green, I 'most wonder if p'raps—just *p'raps*—there is some nixies if you could only see 'em."

"Hi, Prue! You mustn't lean too far over to look. You might tumble out and then, before you knew it, you would be hunting around on the bottom of the pond for the nixies that you think are down there," said Jotham.

Randy's cheek paled, and she quickly grasped the folds of Prue's skirt, lest again the little girl should lean impulsively over the side of the boat.

The sunlight danced upon the water, the bright drops as they fell from the oars seemed like sparkling jewels, and over the surface the dragon-flies hovered, now lighting upon the stern of the boat, then taking zigzag flight toward a lily bud which

offered a perfumed resting-place for the steel-winged insects.

At one point a tiny wharf had been built, and Randy exclaimed, "Let us gather some of the land flowers as well as water lilies." So Jotham made the boat fast, and taking Prue's little hand, he allowed Randy and Nina to lead the way. To Nina every flower which they found was beautiful. She had been surfeited with hothouse blooms, and while she loved the rare exotics which so often decorated her home, she found a new joy in gathering for herself the shy, pretty wild flowers which seemed to spring up for her on every hand.

In the shade of some high bushes Nina sat down to rest, and Randy, choosing some sweet-scented pink blossoms, proceeded to tuck them securely between the locks of her dark hair. Little Prue ran here and there plucking every flower which she saw, twitching them off with scarcely enough stem to permit of arranging them. She held her little skirt with one hand, and with the

other made heroic efforts to gather blossoms to fill it.

Jotham had sauntered down to the wharf to deposit in the boat an armful of green foliage, as they were to decorate *The Randy* for the homeward "voyage." Very skillfully he fastened them in place, and when his task was completed, a green garland passed quite around the boat. Stepping back a few paces, Jotham surveyed his work.

"Fairly good for me," he murmured, "but not quite fine enough for the girls," and he proceeded to place at intervals among the green foliage, clusters of blossoms, and at once saw that their bright hues gave the needed touch of color to the decoration.

"Oh, the fairy boat! The fairy boat!" cried a sweet voice behind him, and, turning, Jotham saw little Prue running toward him, her face radiant with delight.

"Did you do it, Jotham? *Did* you?" she asked, slipping her hand into his, and looking up into his face.

“Why, yes, Pussy, who else did you suppose?”

“Well, I knew ’twas you, or else some of the nixies, and I don’t *really, truly* b’lieve there are any. Oh, Jotham,” she added, “you’re always doing pleasant things; that’s why I love you so.”

Very gently Jotham stooped and took the little girl in his arms. “Try to think, Prue,” he said; “do you remember something I once promised you?”

For an instant her eyes were round with wonder, then a bright light shone in them, as she said, “Oh, now I know, now I ’member. It was one time when I said you were the best big boy I knew. ’Twas long ’fore you went away to Boston to study. You said you’d promise me you’d always be brave an’ good.”

“Well, Prue, I mean to be; I’ll keep that promise faithfully. Now, will you make me a little promise, Prue?”

“Oh, yes,” assented Prue, “because I love you, Jotham. What shall I promise?”

“Promise always to be my little friend,” he answered.

Prue’s brown eyes were grave as they looked into his, and the red lips were firmly set as she said, “I’ll promise, but I’d be it anyway; I’ll always be your *truly* little friend.”

There was a firmness in her voice and manner that moved Jotham strangely. Laughing, mischievous little Prue had not made her promise lightly. Together they retraced their steps to where Randy and Nina awaited them. Prue was again her light-hearted little self, but Jotham, as he looked at her laughing face and listened to her merry chatter, marveled that so blithe a little fairy could but a moment since have been so serious. Nina and Randy were quite ready for the return trip, and Prue, catching their hands, urged them on toward where the garlanded boat awaited them.

“See, see!” she cried, “see the lovely boat! Isn’t Jotham just sweet to make the boat so pretty?”

They laughed merrily at Prue's request for a compliment for Jotham, and Nina said:

"I think you could make your fortune as a decorator, Jotham."

"I believe he could," said Randy, "but he has set his heart upon being a lawyer, and——"

"And if I find myself some day in an office of my own," said Jotham, "I suppose I can use my spare time, while I am waiting for clients, in planning decorations for county fairs and other great events."

When they were once more seated in the boat, Randy proposed that they make a circuit of the pond, lest a single charming spot should remain unexplored. Into every pretty nook they floated, discovering new beauties wherever they went. Under the overhanging branches of the willow trees they seemed as if in a bower, then into the sunlight to gather more lilies, until they lay a snowy heap of fragrance in the bottom of the boat, and Nina, her hands filled with the

lovely blossoms, caught her breath as she exclaimed, "Oh, this is surely an enchanted mill-pond, with flowers, flowers everywhere. See the graceful vines hanging from that old tree trunk! And those little yellow lilies near the shore! Truly, I never before saw so many beautiful flowers growing wild and within reach."

Randy and Jotham enjoyed Nina's pleasure, and shared her enthusiasm. They were very proud to show this charming city girl how truly delightful the country could be. Prue had been unusually quiet, when suddenly she exclaimed, "Oh, look, look! There's Orlando Steubenreiser, the beautiful big man what my kitten is named for!"

They turned and saw a surly-looking man standing at the water's edge surveying them.

"What a rough-looking man," said Nina Irwin; "who is he, Randy?"

Randy laid her hand upon Nina's arm, and Jotham, wondering at Randy's silence, answered for her:

“He is a general helper at the mill, and little Prue claims him for a friend.”

“Well, he’s good to me,” said Prue. “He carried me over some big puddles once when ’twas rainy, an’ he fished my sunbonnet out of this pond once when the wind blew it in, an’ he made me a lovely whistle. He whittled it for me, and I make fine music on it; so I’ve named my kitten for him, an’ I know he’ll grow to be a great, monst’ous cat. Orlando! Orlando Stuben-rei-ser!” cried Prue, “wait for me, I’ve got something for you!”

“Oh, hush!” said Randy, placing her arm around Prue. They were nearing the shore, and as Jotham lifted Prue out of the boat, the tall, dark man took her very gently and set her upon her feet. The little girl held up her handful of white lilies, and the German stolidly took them with a muttered word of thanks. He had seen pond lilies before, but he valued these as the gift of a little child.

Rough, sullen, unfriendly toward others,

he had always a kind word for Prue, for at heart he loved children, and Prue, who never feared him, had charmed him more than he would have been willing to admit. If the little girl had been alone, he would have stopped to listen to her sweet voice and have added his deep bass to the conversation; as it was, he touched his hat brim with a sullen attempt at salutation, and lounged away toward the mill.

"I wonder that Prue dares to speak to him," said Nina; "I think I never saw a face more genuinely surly."

"I am more than half afraid of him," admitted Randy, while Jotham smiled at their fears.

"He is a sullen-looking fellow," he said, "and not particularly prepossessing. Father says that he is well liked at the mill because of his great strength and his willingness to work. He takes no interest in town affairs, and that is, perhaps, one reason why he is unpopular."

"He looked capable of anything," said

Nina, "and he scowled so blackly at you, Jotham, that I wondered if he would be moved to demolish your boat when you were out of sight."

"Just look over your shoulder and you will see that he is doing me a little service," said Jotham. "I thought I fastened the boat securely, but it seems that I was a bit careless, and he, on seeing her drifting, has caught the rope and is now making her fast. I'll run back and thank him; he deserves it."

The little party waited for Jotham by the roadside, and when he rejoined them Randy asked how the man received his thanks.

"In about his usual manner," said Jotham, with a smile; "it was right to thank him, whether he valued my words or not."

"Oh! I forgot to tell him I've named my kitten for him!" exclaimed Prue, in great excitement; "why *didn't* I 'member? 'Twould have made him look happy, I do b'lieve."

"You will have to make a point of telling him the next time you see him. Such an

honor ought to make any man proud," said Jotham.

"Why, would you like the other one to be named for you?" asked Prue, "because 'tain't too late now. His name's Fluffy, but I can make it Fluffy Jotham."

"Oh, what a combination!" said Randy, and Jotham and Nina joined in the laughter.

"Well, that's what it *is*," persisted Prue, "no matter how much you laugh. That little cat's name is *got* to be Fluffy Jotham."

The girls endeavored to restrain their merriment, for little Prue was plainly disgusted, but Jotham asked, with evident anxiety:

"Do you think, Prue, that giving the kitten my name will cause him to look like me as he grows older?"

"I don't know," she answered slowly, as if thinking seriously of the matter; "he's got blue eyes *now*, but Randy says they'll be some other color when he's a big cat."

"In all probability they'll be green," said

Jotham, with a groan, and Prue looked fixedly at him to discover if he were laughing. As there was not a vestige of a smile upon his face, Prue decided that he was the only one of the three who took a sensible view of so important a matter as the naming of the kitten.

“This is the road toward home,” said Jotham, as he saw that Randy and Nina were about to pass it.

“I have an errand at Sandy McLeod’s,” said Randy. “Mother told me to stop there before coming home, and we’ll give Mrs. McLeod some of our lilies; she is very fond of flowers.”

As they walked along the shady road, their arms filled with the fragrant lilies, it appeared as if they might spare a few for any friend whom they should chance to meet. As they turned in at the gate, the dear old lady was standing in her doorway, and her face was radiant as she bade them welcome.

“Ay, glad I am to see ye, Miss Nina an’ a’.

In my cool best room I'll receive ye. Hoot! a part o' the blooms fresh frae the pond for me? Oh, tae think o' it. Sit ye doon, lassies, an' Maester Jotham, 'til I gang oot tae bring a braw bowl tae hold the lilies."

How quaintly beautiful the room appeared to Nina Irwin. Its great oak rafters, its huge fireplace, and the finely carved oak chairs. The lovely little old lady who was so delighted to see them; ah, she was an important part of the picture, for she seemed to harmonize with the beauty of the furnishings, a fitting member of the family of Scottish chieftains and their wives whose portraits adorned the walls. She soon returned with a huge bowl, in which she had arranged her lilies, saying, as she placed it upon the table, "There! that is fit for the queen's drawing-room, but 'twas gi'en me by some dear young friends. What shall I do for ye in return?"

"Only one thing, dear Mrs. McLeod," said Randy; "tell us a story. You often tell one to Prue; tell one to us before we go."

“Oh, do,” urged Nina.

“Begin, ‘Once upon a time,’ ” cried Prue. “The nicest ones always begin that way.”

“Noo, list tae the bairn,” exclaimed the dear old lady, well pleased that Prue should approve her usual manner of commencing a tale.

“The ane tale that’s been filling my mind this day is ane that is true, and ’tis braw for you lassies and Maester Jotham, tho’ a bit old for wee Prue,” said Mrs. McLeod, “but it begins wi’ a wee lad and lassie——”

“Away in bonnie Scotland?” asked Prue.

“Awa’ in bonnie Scotland,” was the smiling assent, “an’ oh, the sunny days that we twa spent at play an’ at our tasks, always taegither—always taegither.”

Jotham glanced at Randy, who sat in the sunlight, every ringlet shining like burnished gold.

“Then frae bairnies they grew tae be lad and lass, still finding nae pleasure except taegither. The lad’s faether had goold tae

spare, the lassie's faether was weel tae do, an' in a' the land there seemed nane happier than the twa young friends. Then wae be it! The lad knew o'er much for his years, an' his faether knew mair, an' a sair dispute parted them. The faether threatened tae cut him off wi' a wee bit portion; the lad said he wad na take the gift o' a' his goold, an' awa' tae America he flew, wi'out a word tae the lass wha ha' been his friend sin' the twa were bairnies. Ne'er a word he wrote, an' the lass——" Mrs. McLeod twisted her apron string.

"Aweel! she feared it wad be unco bold tae write, e'en had she the direction, sae the years were lang, the years were lang, when it happened oddly, as it sometimes weel, a wee lass bid the mon, for mon grown he'd been for mony a long day, tae write a little letter tae the waiting heart in Scotland. Ay, the blessing o' that letter! I feel the beating o' my heart tae-day, as truly as when I saw the fameeliar writing on its wrapper."

"Oh, Mrs. McLeod!" cried Randy, "'tis

your *own* story you are telling us, yours and Sandy's, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is," was the answer, while bright tears filled the sweet eyes, "an' 'twas this blessed bairnie wha said:

" 'Write tae her, write the letter,' an he did write it, a fine, manly letter, takin' a' the blame an' askin' me tae forgi'e.

"Tae forgi'e! I'd done it years before. Weel, there's nae mair tae tell, except tae let little Prue put on the eending."

"And they lived happy ever after," said Prue, clasping her hands and looking up into the face of her old friend.

"An' they lived happy ever after," repeated Mrs. McLeod, "an' noo I dinna ken if ye're a mind for a moral, but say it I do, an' I hope ye'll take it tae heart.

"Don't let a true friendship slip. Ne'er let a kind word remain unspoken that might cement a friendship for a lifetime."

Very quietly they offered her their hands at parting, promising to remember the story and the admonition.

On their homeward way Randy and Nina walked, their arms about each other's waists, Prue clasping Jotham's warm hand, Jotham watching Randy with a new light in his kind dark eyes.

CHAPTER IV

RANDY IN A NEW ROLE

NINA'S four-weeks' stay at the farm had passed so swiftly that Randy found it difficult to realize that the visit had been a reality, not a delightful dream.

From the pretty country village which she had so truly admired Nina went with her mother to a fashionable summer resort, where often, in the midst of social gayety, a vision of a long shady country road which she had often traversed with Randy and Prue would seem so real that a little sigh would tremble upon her lips. Sometimes in fancy she was again upon the mill-pond gathering the snowy lilies which floated upon its shimmering surface, and she was conscious of a vague longing for a few sunny days, free from excitement, such as Randy's home had afforded.

In one of her letters to Randy she wrote:

“I’ve scarcely an idle moment. Drives, teas, receptions, and musicales are filling the flying hours, and I often wish that I could run away for a short time which I might spend in your sunny, peaceful home, after which I think I could resume the ‘whirl’ with renewed vigor.”

Nina’s letters filled Randy with content. She did not long for the life of excitement which they so vividly described. Why should she envy one who frankly admitted that while there was in it much pleasure, there was a deal of weariness as well?

“I enjoyed the fine concerts, and my lovely party, while I was visiting Helen Dayton in Boston,” she thought one day as she looked at her smiling face in the mirror, “but I should not like *always* to be flying from one entertainment to another. Nina tires of it at times, her letters tell that plainly, else she would never long for this little country village.”

It was a part of Randy's cheerful nature to be contented, and while humming softly she was surprised to hear Aunt Prudence in the next room ejaculate:

"Haow on *airth* did we ever manage to get on last winter without Randy?"

"We didn't really *manage*," said Mrs. Weston mildly; "we only sort er pulled through."

How they had missed her!

"I'll make it up to them," thought Randy. "How good they were to let me stay when they were lonely without me."

Tears filled her eyes as she thought how patiently, how unselfishly, they had made it possible for her to spend the winter in the city. The season of study at the private school had been delightful, and Randy knew that when the winter days came she could not prevent a feeling of regret that she could not again be associated with the charming friends which she had made, or join in their gayety. At the same time, she remembered how deeply she had missed the dear ones at

home, and a smile chased away her tears as she said:

“I am glad of one thing. If I am here I surely shall not be homesick. Last season, with all its pleasures, I could not drive away the longing for a sight of the faces of those whom I so dearly love.”

The sunlight came in at the open door and lay, a golden band, upon the floor; the flowers in the garden swayed in the breeze and seemed to be nodding an invitation to Randy as she stood upon the doorstep watching the butterflies as they hovered over the sweetest blossoms. She was indulging in a day-dream, when Prue ran up the walk, breathless and excited.

“Oh, Randy, Randy! come down to the spring,” she cried, “and see the man philandering.”

“See *what?*” said Randy, in surprise.

“See the man philandering,” repeated Prue; “that’s what Mr. Small says he’s doin’. He’s got a funny little three-legged thing in front of him, an’ he’s settin’ on a

three-legged stool, an' has got a handful of long-handled brushes, an' a big wooden plate with bright colors on it. I thought he was making a picture, an' I asked Phoebe why she didn't come an' look at it, but she only shook her head an' wouldn't answer. She's standin' still by the spring with a jug in her hand, an' she didn't move 't all."

"But why is Phoebe out there in the sun?" asked Randy.

"She's philandering, too. Her father says, 'the two on 'em is just a-wasting time philanderin',' but they can't *both* be doin' it, 'cause they isn't doin' the same thing. *Do* come an' look at 'em, Randy; you can see 'em from the road."

"I can't think what Phoebe can be doing," said Randy, as Prue tugged at her dress, and hurried her down the path.

"Why, Phoebe isn't doin' anything," said Prue; "her pa says she *is*, but she *isn't*. It's the big man that's philandering with the wooden plate and those funny brushes. He rubs 'em 'round on the color an' then dau'bs

them onto the thing in front of him, an' I know you'll just 'mire to see him doin' it."

When they reached the wall, Phoebe had left her position by the spring, and was eagerly watching the progress of the picture, as the artist proceeded to touch up the lights upon the birches, or strengthen the shadows in the little pool of water.

"There, see him doin' it, Randy; don't he look funny, sittin' on that teenty stool?" said Prue in her shrill little treble; and, much amused, the artist turned a smiling face toward the child who thought his task and attitude peculiar. Phoebe urged them to come nearer, and inspect the sketch, and when Randy stood beside her, she introduced them quite grandly, designating the artist as "my friend, Mr. Blentmore."

It was indeed an interesting picture. The figure of Phoebe, while not intended for a portrait, gave a fair representation of her form, her coloring, and her general bearing; and the spring in the foreground, and the

clump of trees just behind her, served to make a pretty composition.

"It is lovely," said Randy, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "How fine you look, Phoebe, with your jug in your hand, and your figure reflected in the spring."

"It looks *some* prettier than Phoebe does, doesn't it?" asked Prue, scrutinizing the painted figure, with her little nose nearly touching the canvas. She felt that she was complimenting the artist's skill when she declared the painting to be more charming than the model. Phoebe's face flushed with sudden annoyance. She was much delighted that Mr. Blentmore had chosen to paint her, and Prue's remark was certainly not flattering.

The artist answered tactfully, "You must wait, little girl, until I ask Phoebe to pose again, when I am sure you will think that she looks quite as nice as the girl in the picture."

"Yes, I'll like to wait and see her," said Prue; "will she be ready pretty soon?"



Amy Brooks.

PHŒBE WAS READY, AND WITH QUITE A SELF-SATISFIED AIR SHE
RESUMED HER POSE *Page 67*

The artist smiled at the little girl's eagerness.

"I think we will begin again, Miss Phoebe," he said; "that is, if you are sufficiently rested."

Yes, Phoebe was ready, and with quite a self-satisfied air she resumed her pose, and looked toward her friends for approval.

"Turn a little to the left, please. Ah, that is right," said Mr. Blentmore, and taking up his palette and brushes he resumed work upon the canvas. Randy watched with rapt attention, as his dexterous touches strengthened the light and shadow.

Prue, her head tipped at an angle, as if trying to determine the merit of his work, watched the placing of every brush-mark.

At last she spoke.

"I do just *'mire* to watch you philandering," she said sweetly.

"Sh——" said Randy softly, but Prue's speech had been plainly audible, and the artist turned in surprise as he said:

“ You like to see me doing *what*? I am *painting*, child.”

Very innocently Prue looked up in his face as she answered :

“ Well, *I* thought you was painting, 'cause I saw the pretty colors, but Phoebe's father said you was philandering all the time, you 'n Phoebe, but Phoebe *isn't*, 'cause she hasn't any paints and brushes like what you're doin' it with.”

Jack Blentmore turned a searching glance upon Prue, who, quite unaware that she had said anything which was aught but complimentary, looked up into his handsome dark eyes unflinchingly, and waited to see what he intended to say. She blinked in the sunlight, and mentally decided that he was not nearly as fine-looking as Jotham Potts.

Randy stood with downcast eyes. “ Why *did* Prue make such queer speeches,” she thought.

“ I knew that Mr. Small had a poor opinion of the fine arts, but I never got it quite as straight as that,” he said, with a laugh.

“Pa doesn’t ’preciate the picture, because—he hasn’t seen it since it was just begun,” faltered Phoebe. She hoped that her father’s speech, which Prue had so ruthlessly repeated, would not so wound the artist that he would leave the task incomplete, but she did not know Jack Blentmore. He was simply amused at the rustic estimate of his ability, and quite determined to finish the picture, which promised to be a credit to his reputation for clever work.

“If you continue to pose as well as you have this morning, I think the picture will be a success,” he said. “Even your father may decide that it isn’t half bad, Miss Phoebe, when he sees it completed.”

“I’m ’most sure he will,” said Phoebe, with a smile, “and ma said this morning that she hoped you’d stay long enough to finish it. She thinks it is just wonderful now.”

“It is truly lovely,” said Randy. “I shall like to sce it when it is quite done.”

“An’ I’ll just ’mire to,” said Prue, look-

ing over her shoulder, as Randy led her gently toward the path. Randy would have been delighted to have watched the artist longer, but she felt that their conversation might confuse him. He was evidently making an earnest study of his work, and while very genial and courteous, Randy believed that he would like to paint for a time without interruption, so, promising to stroll down to the spring some other morning, she urged Prue to follow her, and together they hastened up the path toward home. Prue skipped along, chattering incessantly; Randy, whose mind was filled with thoughts of the painting which they had just seen, paid little heed to her prattle until Prue insisted upon being answered.

“You don’t hear me when I talk,” she cried. “I say, which *was* the painter man doin’? Was he *truly* painting, like he said he was, or was he philandering, same’s Mr. Small said?”

“Now, Prue, you *must* not say that again. Mr. Small ought never to have said it. Mr.

Blentmore was painting, and I think that I never saw a lovelier picture," said Randy.

"Well," persisted Prue, "I wonder if Phoebe's father *knows* he oughtn't to have said it? I b'lieve I'll ask him next time I see him."

Randy refrained from offering further rebuke. In all probability Prue would forget all about both picture and painter before she again met Mr. Small.

Prue ran around the corner to find Tabby and her kittens, and Randy entered the house. Aunt Prudence sat by the window, a letter in her hand, which she had evidently been reading. The envelope lay upon the floor at her feet, and her attitude and expression betokened perplexity. Randy crossed the room, picked up the envelope, and placing it in Aunt Prudence's lap, sat down upon a low stool beside her.

"What is it, Aunt Prudence?" she asked, "something in your letter which troubles you?"

"Well, Randy," said Aunt Prudence, "I

must say the letter pesters me some. While I've been here I've had Jake Somersworth and his wife at work on my place, an' I flattered myself that things was progressin' stupendous, when, all of a sudden, Jake's decided ter quit farmin', an' his wife's concluded that she needs a rest, and is goin' ter her mother's. That means that I've got ter go home an' take a hand, hire new help, an', in short, keep things a-runnin'. I wouldn't mind that so much, but yer mother can't spare me, an' between thinkin' I can't leave, an' knowin' I ought ter, I'm in a state er mind."

"Why, Aunt Prudence," said Randy, "I'm here, and I'm able to be more helpful than you think."

"I know you're willin', Randy," Aunt Prudence answered, "but ye haven't had the experience ter take the runnin' of the house on yer shoulders. Dr. Bushnell says yer ma's health is all right, but she's sort er tired like, an' I told him I'd stay an' be house-keeper this winter, an' let her help me about

the light work, but my plan seems 'baout upset."

Randy, drawing her stool nearer, laid her hand upon Aunt Prudence's arm as she eagerly asked:

"He did *truly* say that mother was only tired? Did he say that with more rest and less work she would regain her strength? I knew that she looked different in some way, but I thought that she had missed me, and that that made her smile less cheerful. Why didn't I know that she was getting tired, without waiting for someone to tell me?"

"Ye've no cause ter blame yerself, Randy," said Aunt Prudence, with unusual gentleness, laying her hand upon the pretty head. "Ye're a pattern girl, Randy, an' haow ye *do* love them that ye care for at all! Ye needn't look harassed, fer I shan't leave my brother's home when I'm needed in it, even ef my own little place stands idle fer a spell. All yer ma needs is rest, an' I mean ter help her ter git it."

Still leaning against Aunt Prudence,

Randy sat very still, studying the problem from all sides. At last she looked up, a bright light in her eyes, and a tender smile parting her lips.

“I will be housekeeper *myself*,” she announced, “and you shall be free to go and set things straight in your own little home. We shall miss you, Aunt Prudence, it is such a comfort to have you with us; but you are anxious about the farm, and truly I know that I can be a fine housekeeper. I’ll ask father to get someone to do the heavy work, and then I’ll be the manager, and ever so grandly I’ll tell mother that she may help me about some of the little tasks which cannot tire her. Oh, I shall write and invite you to visit me, Aunt Prudence, and when you come you will say, ‘Well, really, the house looks quite nice, considering that only a girl takes charge of it.’”

Randy clasped her hands, and a triumphant little smile made her face radiant. She knew that it was promising to undertake a great task, but in her eagerness to do it will-

ingly and lovingly, she felt that it was possible to accomplish it with much credit to herself, and a world of comfort for the mother whom she loved so dearly.

“Blessings on ye, Randy,” said Aunt Prudence, “I’m more sure of yer success than I’m able ter say. I’ll make a flyin’ trip home, an’ when I’ve set things straight there, I’ll come back to ye, an’ I’m sure I’ll find things in fine order here. Ye possess ambition, an’ a lovin’ heart, an’ the two will gen’rally ’complish wonders.”

“When you goin’ to fly, Aunt Prudence?” asked Prue, as she peeped in at the window; “I want to see you doin’ it.”

“Land sakes, child! Haow ye made me jump! It’s a wonder ye didn’t make me fly, an’ aout er my wits at that,” was the startled answer.

“Oh, I wish you had! It would have been fine to have seen you,” said Prue, with the air of one who had missed a fine exhibition.

That night at tea Randy said abruptly:

“What would you think, father, if I

should say that I intended to try my hand at housekeeping for a few weeks?"

With a merry twinkle in his kind blue eyes he answered: "I should say that Randy Weston, as I know her, could accomplish 'most anything she set her mind on." He laughed softly as he saw the color brighten in Randy's cheeks. Aunt Prudence had told him of the letter which she had received, and of Randy's determination to take the care of the household upon her own young shoulders for a time. Mrs. Weston looked from Randy to her husband, and again at Randy, with such a bewildered expression upon her gentle face that Randy could keep her secret no longer.

"Well, I declare," exclaimed Mrs. Weston, when the plan was unfolded, "the idea of lettin' Randy try ter be housekeeper, while I take a rest. Why, father, she's only just out er school, and I'm only tired. I'm not sick so but I'm able ter keep on 'til Aunt Prudence comes back."

"Naow, mother," said Mr. Weston, "ye

better listen a spell 'til I tell ye all something ye don't know.

“ Sister Prudence told me 'baout Randy's plan this afternoon, an' I thought so well of it that, right on the spur of the moment, 'thout askin' yer permission, so ter speak, I drove over ter Jim Flanders, an' hired Philury, an' she's ter be Randy's right-hand helper, an' she's glad er the chance. She's strong an' willin', a good combination, I tell ye.”

“ Why, father,” said Randy, “ I'd rather have her to help me than anyone I know of, she's so good-tempered and cheery, and, as you say, so strong.”

“ She sent word ter ye, Randy, that ye'd have precious little ter do after she arrived. She'll be here a few days 'fore yer Aunt Prudence goes, ter git the hang er things; and, mother, ye'll have a chance ter play fine lady fer a spell,” he continued, “ while Randy shows us how she proposes ter d'rect Philury.”

His speech ended in a chuckle, and, after

some remonstrance, Mrs. Weston agreed that, after all, the plan was a wise one, and likely to be a success.

Philury Flanders, as she was familiarly called, was what might best be described as robust. She was tall, with broad shoulders and a generous waist, and an arm and hand which bespoke strength rather than beauty. Her large round face was ever smiling, and her hair, which she called auburn, was generally described as red. The fact that it was of a fine bronze tint quite escaped the attention of her village friends, and they continued to look upon it with aversion and pity. What could be more undesirable than to be a red-haired girl?

She had promised to arrive promptly on Wednesday morning, and true to her word, just as the kitchen clock struck seven, Jim Flanders drove up to the door, and Philury alighted, a carpet-bag in one hand and a large cotton umbrella in the other.

“Good-morning!” she cried; “here I be, jest as I promised, on the dot er seven, too. All my belongings are in this ere bag, an’ my ambrill ’ll keep me dry of a Sunday ef it chances ter rain.”

She set her umbrella in a corner of the kitchen, and her bag in front of it, lest it might fall; then, turning to Mrs. Weston, she said:

“I heared Randy’s ter be mistress fer a spell. Now, I’ve ’rived all ready fer work, so who’ll give me d’rections haow ter perceed?” She laughed as she said it, and her mirth was infectious.

“I believe I’ll let Randy try her hand at managing ter-day,” said Mrs. Weston, “fer I see she’s anxious ter prove her ability, an’ do you help her ter plan, as well as ter work. She’s young and inexperienced, but she’s set her mind on helpin’ me ter get rested. I know that ye’re a master hand at workin’, Philury, an’ ye’ve a deal er good sense as well, so I’ll let ye try with Randy an’ see what ye’ll ’complish; but I’ll say right naow,

that I know ye'll do well, an' I'm glad ter have ye with us."

"Will you bake me some gingerbread rabbits same 's Aunt Prudence does?" asked Prue.

Philury dearly loved children, and Prue was her especial favorite. Taking the little girl in her strong arms she said:

"I'll make ye a hull Noah's Ark full er gingerbread critters the fust day we bake, 'though I shouldn't wonder if 'twould be hard ter tell t'other from which, unless they're labeled."

CHAPTER V

JABEZ BRIMBLECOM VISITS COUSIN SABRINY

THE leafy branches met overhead as if in greeting, and the warm summer sunlight flickered through the leaves, now green, now golden, a fairy network of sunshine and shade. Rambling stone walls bounded the roadside, and over their moss-grown sides the barberry and wild rosebushes swung their branches as if offering protection from wind or rain.

The roses were gone, but upon the branches of the barberry tiny clusters of green berries gave promise of a fine harvest of scarlet fruit with the coming of autumn. The low, trailing blackberry vines crept along over the grass at the base of the wall; and here and there a belated white blossom looked askance at the small fruit upon the

same stem, which had thus far gained but a pale red from the sun.

Later it would be black, but the blossom did not know that.

Thick dust lay upon their leaves, and upon the white clover, which had grown out into the road to ask the sunbeams for a kiss, and in all the village there was no lovelier spot than this—the main road to the Centre.

An old chaise came leisurely rattling along, and Dr. Bushnell leaned forward to drink in the fresh air, and to feast upon the beauty spread before him. In his hand he held a long whip, which never touched Sorrel's back but for one purpose—to remove an impertinent fly.

“Well, well, but this is a fine morning,” he said, apparently addressing everything in general. “Fine morning, an’ no mistake.

“I guess I’ll pick a few blossoms an’ take ’em home. ’Twill be like transplantin’ a bit of the beauty hereabaouts.” The genial old doctor had contracted a habit of talking to himself when, as he said, “he had no bet-

ter company;" and as he gathered the long spikes of butter-and-cheese and a few pink and white clovers he recounted those items which had interested him in the morning's batch of news.

"Fine notion, that of Jabez Brimblecom's, ter find aout when his cousin Sabriny Boardman was thinkin' of startin' fer her Boston home, an' go with her, so's ter see to it that she didn't change her mind an' decide ter make him a longer visit." He laughed softly as he continued: "A pretty dance she led him an' his wife. Jabez is good-natured, but he vaows he'll git even, an' I shouldn't wonder ef he did."

A large clump of the yellow blossoms tempted him, and he trudged toward them, old Sorrel following and taking occasional nips at the grass.

"Fine flowers, those," said the doctor, holding them off at arm's length, and making a telescope of his other hand, through which to view them.

"There's Square Weston's Randy start-

ing aout to run the haouse, while Philury Flanders furnishes the muscle for the ac-tooal work. Randy's a great girl, full of love, ambition, and pluck. Pretty as a pictur, I must say. I told her I admired her vim; told her 'twas jest the thing ter make her ma spry again, an' shook hands with Philury an' wished her good luck in her new place. Don't I remember the day last summer when she declared she could beat any er the boys a-gittin' in hay. They stumped her, an' she pitched in, with the result that she got the first load started toward the barn, the sassy chaps all j'inin' in a chorus, singing:

“ ‘Philury, Philury,
Ye work like all fury.’ ”

Haow she did laugh; I can 'most hear her naow.” He chuckled at the remembrance.

Having gathered a fine handful of the blossoms, he clambered into the chaise and once more jogged along the road.

“Lots goin' on in the place naow,” he said, resuming his monologue. “Phoebe

Small a-standin' aout in the sun when it's hotter 'n blazes jest ter let that there painter feller daub a lot er paint onto a pictur er her. I shouldn't wonder ef somethin' 'sides the paint and brushes interested her, 'tho he can't be much of er man. The idee of an able-bodied feller like him a settin' raound an' foolin' with paints. Wonder ef he ever crochets or knits? "

Evidently the good doctor's idea of a manly fellow's occupation was that it should be muscular or professional. That painting could be a profession, he never dreamed. To him the term embraced but two things—law or medicine.

Arrived at the Centre, the doctor thought of an errand which his wife had charged him to remember, and leading Sorrel to the cool shadow beneath the willow tree, he laid upon the carriage seat the wild flowers which he had gathered and climbed the rickety steps and entered Barnes' store. Apparently something of great interest was about to occur. Nate Burnham sat in the niche

behind the rusty stove, a position which he habitually occupied both summer and winter. His hands were clasped about his knees, and his mouth was wide open as if to entrap any stray bit of gossip which his ears failed to catch.

Upon a large keg sat a young farmer who, from time to time, helped himself to a craker from the open barrel beside him. He assumed a thoughtful expression, as if wishing it to be understood that he took the crackers in a moment of abstraction, and not at all because he needed a lunch.

Sandy McLeod stood near the doorway. A merry twinkle in his eyes betokened his interest in the subject of conversation, but while he listened attentively to the comments of the others, he expressed no opinion, seeming rather to be reserving his remarks until all had aired their views, when his should cap the climax.

Jim Flanders leaned against the window-frame, industriously braiding three long straws together, while Silas Barnes, the pro-

prietor, stood in the center of the group, punctuating his remarks by smartly tapping his left hand with a yellow envelope which he held in his right.

Joel Simpkins had driven over to the station to await an incoming train which should bring a parcel of goods for the store, and the doctor, seeing that he could not at once receive the attention of proprietor or clerk, joined the group of listeners around Silas Barnes.

“Jabez is cute, I tell ye,” he was saying, “an’ of all his tricks this is the beatenest. I told him he’d got his cousin Sabriny Boardman fer a steady thing this summer, an’, says I, ‘I’m sorry fer ye, Jabez, fer I know she’s a case, and no mistake; but I’m even sorrier fer yer good wife. Sabriny wasn’t no joke at short range when she was Sabriny Brimblecom, but naow she’s Mis’ C. Barnard Boardman she’s ’nough sight wuss,’ an’ says he, ‘Don’t ye be too sure of what ye say, Silas,’ says he, ‘fer I’m plan-nin’ ter live up ter the good old sayin’ which

bids us ter speed the partin' guest,' and then he chuckled as he went off up the road.

"It seems Sabriny got onto a pooty high hoss, an' after a reg'lar tantrum that made Mis' Brimblecom 'baout sick, Jabez didn't actooally tell her ter go, but he did kind er int'mate that she needn't feel 'bliged ter stay."

"An Jabez could jest do that," chuckled old Nate Burnham, "he could allus put er thing so's ter make it plain."

"'N he says he couldn't write ter all of ye, but he tells me ter tell ye haow his plan succeeded, 'n I do'no's there's any harm in readin' ye his letter," concluded Barnes.

"Let's hev it, Silas," said Jim Flanders; "Mis' Boardman undertook ter snub my Philury, an' I'd like ter hear what Jabez has got ter say 'baout his visit."

Silas Barnes adjusted his glasses, cleared his throat, and opening the letter commenced to read:

“FRIEND BARNES:

“I take my pen in hand, an’ haow *else* could I take it, ter tell ye that I arriv in Boston in comp’ny with cousin Sabriny, an’ I’m naow high an’ dry in her flat. I say high an dry, fer I was some s’prised ter find she lived in a tenement (no, she won’t hev that), it’s a apartment haouse, an’ I guess they call it a flat ’cause the pesky thing has got a flat roof, an’ the heat pours daown on us like blazes! The only cool thing in sight is the fact er me insistin’ on comin’ home with her, an’ she hoppin’ mad ter leave our farm at all.

“I hev ter laugh when I think haow I left the water runnin’ in the bowl the fust day I got here. Nobody knew it fer much as an hour. Sabriny came flyin’ at me, an’ says she:

“ ‘You’ve left the water runnin’!’

“ ‘Be ye short er water, so’s ye hev ter be keerful?’ says I.

“ ‘Ef ye come an’ look at the floor I guess ye won’t think that water is scarce,’ she answered, kind er tart like. I didn’t do that a-purpose, but she was jist as mad as ef I’d planned it. Whilst she was with us she faound consid’able fault with the food.

Naow *I* think we set aour table pooty gen'rous, so I thought I'd let her see haow it seemed ter ent'tain a grumbler.

"Ef my wife had been with me, she'd a-put a stop ter my doin's. As 'twas, I did as I see fit. I didn't intend ter be *too* mean, but jest ter give Sabriny a leetle taste er what she'd been givin' *us*. She's been ter cookin'-school, and fixed up all sorts er leetle messes that she calls fancy, an' I call foolish.

"One day she made some things she called croquettes. Pesky little things with a piece er green weed stuck a-top of it. I pulled the green stuff off er mine. She wanted ter know why.

" "'Cause,' says I, 'I never eat greens raw, I prefer 'em biled.'

"She wouldn't answer, but the next day, when she set a plate before me with something minced er hashed, I picked it apart an' put on my glasses an' peeked inter it.

" "'Jabez Brimblecom, what be ye doin'?' ' says she, reel exasperated.

" "'I'm a leetle pertic'lar what I eat,' says I, 'an' I vaow I'd like ter know what this 'ere is made of.' I wouldn't a-done it, but she'd pestered us 'til we was 'baout

wild. There's no doubt but Sabriny was mad.

"‘Jabez Brimblecom,’ she screamed, ‘ye may jest eat what I set before ye.’

"‘I’m a-goin’ ter, sence there’s nothin’ else,’ says I, ‘an’ I’ll thank ye ter do the same when next ye set aout ter visit us.’

"‘I do’no’ when I’ll come agin,’ says she, an’ it occurred ter me that there was allus *something* ter be thankful fer.

"I’m comin’ home come Thursday; I’m sort er tired er my visit, an’ I know Sabriny is.

“Yours fer luck,

“JABEZ BRIMBLECOM.”

The group around Silas Barnes had listened attentively until the last word of the characteristic letter had been read, when their restrained merriment burst forth in uproarious laughter, and old Nate Burnham afterward declared that “their racket rattled the crock’ry on the shelves.”

“Wal, I’m glad ter hear that somebody sot daown on some er her fine notions,” remarked Jim Flanders, “fer she see my darter Philury at church in her Sunday

clothes, an' she took the op'tunity ter say:

" 'Ye're a pooty good-lookin' gal, Philury, 'cept that ye're some countrified.'

" My darter was mad, an' I didn't blame her when she said:

" 'I didn't ask fer yer 'pinion, an' I do'no' as ye want mine, but I'll return yer compliment by tellin' ye, Mis' Boardman, that ye 'pear pooty well, 'cept that ye're somewhat imperlite.'

" Sabriny said that she couldn't be 'crittersized,' 'cause she got her ettyket out er a book, and Philury said she reelized that while perliteness come nat'ral ter some folks, 'twas quite a stunt fer others ter learn."

The young farmer who occupied the keg helped himself to another cracker as he asked:

" What's her husband's bus'ness, that he can 'low Sabriny ter spend so much on clothes jest ter cut a swath in the village, an' 'stonish us all? "

“I do’no’,” said Silas Barnes. “I asked her oncet, and she said something ’baout his bein’ ‘on the sidewalk’ an’ ‘sellin’ on the street,’ an’ as innocent as yer please, I said:

“‘Oh, yes, peddlin’ garden truck,’ an’ she nearly took my head off, so ’t I didn’t dares’t ter ask any more ’baout it.”

“She was sae grand an’ a’ that I thought of a balloon when e’er I sat my een on her, an’ I hae been on the same road wi’ her when I’ve questioned if there’d be room for we twa ter pass wi’out freection,” said Sandy McLeod, “but she hae doubtless her gude points.”

“Wal, they don’t stand aout in humps,” said old Nate Burnham, with a chuckle.

“Jabez is a gret feller,” said Silas Barnes, “one er the best men that ever lived, an’ one er the cutest.”

At this point Johnny Buffum ran in at the door, shouting excitedly.

“Is Dr. Bushnell in here? ’cause he’s got ter come over ter ol’ Mr. Simpkins’s this minute.”

"Here I am, my boy," said the doctor, "what's the matter over there?"

"Ye mustn't wait a minute," cried Johnny, his eyes wild with excitement.

"Timotheus has tumbled onto his head, an' they say he's busted it. Ol' Mis' Simpkins is er wringin' her hands an' do'no' what ter do, an' I got ter go 'n git Mis' Hodgkins ter come 'n tell her. Mis' Hodgkins knows everything;" and having seen the doctor's chaise rattling up the road, he scampered off at high speed to find the village "know-all."

Dr. Bushnell had forgotten his errand at the store, and the wild flowers which he had gathered for his wife lay unnoticed upon the seat beside him, as he gently urged Sorrel to hasten over the hot, dusty road toward the Simpkins farm.

That Johnny Buffum might have exaggerated Timotheus' mishap never occurred to him, and in his anxiety to reach his patient, the road seemed to have gained length since he had last driven over it. Arrived

at the house, he was met by old Mr. Simpkins, who hastened down the path to meet him.

“It’s a awful accident,” he cried, gesticulating wildly, “an’ it all comes er Timotheus er-havin’ a tremenjous big head. The poor fellow was up in the loft, er elocutin’ somethin’ what he’d jest writ. I was daown on the barn floor a watchin’ his fine gesturs, when all to oncet, bein’s I say, top-heavy, he pitched over, an’ daown onto the floor head fust, an’ I’m most afeared his head’s actooally busted. Jest come in an’ look at him; he ain’t known anything sence he fell. His intellec’ reely tipped him over.”

Mrs. Hodgkins had hastened across the pasture which lay between her own home and the Simpkins farm, and having shrewdly guessed that simple remedies might cause Timotheus to regain consciousness, she applied some home-made restoratives, and when Dr. Bushnell entered the room, the young man opened his eyes. His first words were quite characteristic of him,

and the good old doctor found it difficult to hide his amusement.

"D'ye think any er my brains got spilt?" he asked.

"I ain't examined the barn yet," said the doctor dryly. "Jest naow I think I'll have a look at yer head.

"Ye're all right, 'cept a shakin' up," he announced later, when, having carefully examined Timotheus, he found neither broken bones nor dislocation.

"Ye'll be lame an' stiff, an' some black an' blue, but ye'll be all right in a day er two."

"Wal, I wonder what ye think er Timotheus' head naow?" Joel asked derisively. "Any other head would er been busted with such a whack as that."

"Joel," said old Mr. Simpkins, impressively, "*your* head couldn't 'a' stood it. Holler things bust easy. Timotheus' head is chuck full!"

CHAPTER VI

THE BURNING OF THE MILL

“THERE’S no place in the haouse like this settin’-room, Randy,” said Mrs. Weston, as she drew the large rocker to the window, and seated herself in it, leaning luxuriously against its cushions. “An’ it’s all your doin’s,” she continued, “fer the minute ye reached home ye commenced fixin’ this an’ that, ’til nobody ’d know the room was the same old settin’-room we used ter hev. I’m sure I don’t want ter be anywhere else, it’s so cheerful like. Sometimes I think it rests me jest ter set still and look ’raound. Yer father’s so pleased with yer efforts ter beautify the place, he talks er little else, an’ this mornin’, ’fore you was up, he walked in here an’, says he, ‘This looks somethin’ like.’”

“It would be worth any amount of work and planning to see you and father so

pleased," Randy answered, as she put the last stitch into a bright cover for a sofa cushion, and then proceeded to draw it on over the plain cotton pillow which lay upon the lounge.

Indeed Randy had accomplished much when she had converted a bare, uninteresting room into a cozy, inviting retreat toward which every member of the household turned for rest and cheer. The floor had been newly painted, and a large carpet rug had been brought from Boston by Silas Barnes, after he had received countless injunctions regarding color and design. The walls had been hung with paper which harmonized with the colors in the rug; a fine, large rocker had been chosen for Mrs. Weston, and several chairs had been added to the furnishings.

The old lounge boasted a bright covering of flowered cretonne, as well as a wealth of gay cushions, and upon the walls hung several etchings and reproductions of water-colors which Helen Dayton had given Randy

during her stay in Boston. "They will brighten your rooms," she had said, and she had spoken truly.

Out in the kitchen Philury Flanders worked as if work were the only thing worth living for, and as she bustled about from one task to another, she lifted her sonorous voice in song:

"The better the day, the better the deed,
The hotter the sun, the taller the weed,
For reel hard work I can't be beat,
There don't no grass grow under my feet."

A jolly laugh followed this unique verse. Evidently Philury had been improvising.

Randy and her mother softly echoed the laughter.

"She's just a blessin'," said Mrs. Weston. "She does everything so cheerful an' willin', an' *you* take every care off my mind, Randy. I never would b'lieve a girl jest aout er school could take hold an' manage things as ye've proved ye're able to. I only hope I shan't get shiftless, havin' things made so easy fer me."

"Oh, mother, the idea of *your* acquiring
L. of C.

a shiftless disposition," said Randy, with a laugh; "you could not if you wished to. You will get rested, and feel like your old self, but father says that you shall *stay* rested, for Philury is to be with us, to do all the heavy work."

Again the voice from the kitchen made itself heard:

"The hotter the sun, the cooler the shade,
Sugar an' lemons 'll make lemonade;
The cooler the shade, the hotter the sun;
Ye don't caount yer cookies 'til bakin' is done."

Surely the muse had Philury in her clutches.

"Did you *ever* hear such tunes as she sings?" asked Randy.

"The words she must make up as she goes along, an' I guess 't wouldn't be rash ter say that the tunes was home manufacture," Mrs. Weston replied, laughing heartily with Randy.

Soon an animated conversation was in progress. Evidently Prue was giving directions, and Philury endeavoring to comprehend their meaning.

“Well, if he’s to be a *very* nice boy, his feets mus’n’t be bigger ’n his head, an’ the girl’s apron doesn’t show now she’s fryin’,” complained Prue.

“Naow, don’t ye worry, Prue, they’ll be beauties when they’re done, sure’s my name’s Philury Flanders.”

“Oh! oh, see his toes a-turnin’ in! What ’ll we do, Philury?” cried Prue in great excitement.

“Let ’em turn,” said Philury. “Some gret folks has been ’bliged ter walk a-toein’ in. My gret Uncle Ichabod was allus a-stumblin’ over his own toes, but as long’s he tumbled into riches, nobody ever thought much ’baout it, an’ my cousin Bim’lech Shackleford’s one er the first men in his taown, bein’ ’lowed ter caount the votes on ’lection day, an’ janitor ter the taown hall; think er *that!* an’ him a-toein’ in like a crab! I tell ye, Prue, that boy’s been gittin’ han’somer every minute he’s been a-fryin’, an’ naow run an’ git yer own little plate an’ I’ll take him an’ the girl aout fer ye. I’ll put some paow-

dered sugar onto the girl's apron; that 'll make it show up fine."

Evidently the experiment proved to be a success, for little shouts of delight announced Prue's approval. "See! see!" she cried, rushing excitedly into the sitting-room, her plate grasped firmly in both dimpled hands, "this is Randy and Jotham just beautifully fried! Why, you mus'n't laugh, Randy; they ain't funny. Jotham's toes turns in some, an' your face is fried browner on one side than the other, but you're both beautiful, an' fine to eat."

"They look very tempting," said Randy. "I was not laughing at the figures, I was only thinking how funny it sounded when you said that Randy and Jotham had been fried."

"Well, 't wasn't *truly* you," Prue answered, as gravely as if the explanation were necessary. At her earnest request Mrs. Weston and Randy tasted the cakes, and little Prue, seating herself upon the floor with the plate in her lap, was rapidly demol-

ishing the fried effigies of Randy and Jotham, when someone came hurrying up the path to the door. Without pausing to knock, a young lad rushed into the kitchen, where Philury, with her back toward the door, was carefully taking the sizzling doughnuts from the kettle.

“Where’s Square Weston?” he shouted, and Philury, with a cry and a frantic jump, landed her doughnuts upon the floor.

“Why in creation did ye shout so, Bob Witherspoon?” cried the irate girl; “ain’t that a pretty mess fer me ter clear up?”

“I’m paowerful sorry,” the lad replied, “jest paowerful sorry, I tell ye, but they’s difficulty daown at the mill, an’ they told me ter run fer Square Weston, the only man the fellers will listen ter.”

“Wal, ye did scare me, but I s’pose I kin say I spilt the doughnuts myself,” Philury answered, her good nature, as usual, asserting itself; “an’ as ter the Square, he’s daown in the medder lot. Said he’d stay there ’til

dinner-time, an' p'raps later. What's the bother at the mill?" she called after his receding figure.

Bob turned, and as he ran toward the meadow, shouted something in reply, but the fresh breeze carried his words in another direction, so Philury was no wiser than if he had not answered.

In the kitchen, Philury busied herself with collecting her scattered cakes and clearing away the hot fat which had been freely spattered, until at last the room presented the spotless aspect which delighted her orderly soul.

In the sitting-room, Randy and her mother wondered what the difficulty at the mill might be. That Squire Weston should have been sent for to help quell the disturbance was not at all surprising. He was well known in his own village and in the surrounding towns as being an honest, kind-hearted man; one who was sufficiently just to look at both sides of a question, and whose sympathy was with employer or work-

man, according as his sense of right directed.

“I can’t think what sort er disturbance it can be,” said Mrs. Weston. “I do wish everybody didn’t feel that whenever a little thing vexes ’em, er their help gets troublesome, they must send fer yer father ter come and straighten things aout. Not but that I like ter think that all the people hereabaouts value his judgment, but when it comes ter the men at the mill, I don’t like it. Martin Meers an’ his son are all well ’nough, but I don’t like the looks er that Canadian they’ve hired, an’ that big German—what’s his name, Randy?”

“Orlando Steubenreiser,” said Randy. “That is his name, and why Prue isn’t afraid of him, I can’t see. I know he seems to be gentle with her, but he is such a giant, and he glowers at one in such a fierce way, that I believe any child but Prue would hardly dare to speak to him.”

At dinner Mr. Weston seemed pre-occupied, and Randy watched him closely, wish-

ing, yet hesitating, to question him. At last, when Prue slipped from her chair and asked permission to run out and feed Tabby and her kittens, Mrs. Weston smiled and nodded assent. Then, turning to her husband, she asked: "Why did Martin Meers send fer ye, father? What's goin' on daown at the mill, an' why couldn't he settle it himself?"

"I don't like the looks er things daown there any more than Meers does," Mr. Weston replied.

"The difficulty commenced when he hired the big German. Not but he's peaceable 'nough, but his looks are agin him, an' the other men are inclined ter annoy him when they git the chance. He seems ter take it stoic-like, as if 't was part er the job, but the little Canadian don't take their twittin' pleasantly, an' ter make matters wuss, the hands that were born here declared to-day that they won't work with furreigners, ef the mill stands still. I tried ter show 'em that they was standin' in their own light, a-goin' 'thout wages ter pay fer bein' obstinate; but

they won't listen, an' Meers is 'baout wild. While his mill ain't runnin' folks 'll carry their grist ter the mill in the next taown, an' p'raps git in a habit er goin' there. Meers would give in, an' hire other help in place er the two they object ter, but he says Steubenreiser an' the Canadian are the best men he's ever had. Naow, while the men are daown on the Canadian an' the German, the Canadian himself is agin Steubenreiser, so he hasn't a friend in the whole batch, and haow they'll settle the thing is more'n I'm able ter say."

"Why on airth can't they work together, peaceable-like, gettin' their wages, an' takin' care er their fam'lies," asked Mrs. Weston, "instid er squabblin' like a lot er silly boys?"

"Well, I hope Meers won't send fer ye agin, father, fer I don't like ter hev ye mixed up in the quarrels er the men, even as peacemaker, fer when they're so unreasonable there's no tellin' which way they'll vent their wrath, 'specially ef they misunderstand ye,

an' choose ter think ye take sides with Meers."

"Don't ye worry, mother; they know that I talked fer their good, only they didn't choose ter 'low it," Mr. Weston replied, as he went out to resume work in the meadow.

The sun shone in through the vine-covered window and touched Prue's soft curls as she sat upon the rug playing with the kittens. Tabby, who had enjoyed her dinner, sat with her forepaws tucked snugly in, a picture of contentment. Through her half-shut eyes she placidly watched Prue, and Randy declared that Tabby's motherly pride was flattered by the attention which her kittens were receiving.

In the afternoon Belinda and Jemima Babson came over to see Randy, and Mrs. Hodgkins, with her usual batch of news, arrived at the same time, so that it happened that Prue, who wearied of their conversation, ran out to play, and was not missed until tea time.

"I can't think where next to hunt for her, mother," said Randy. "I've been down by the beehives, where she so often sits with Tabby, watching the bees, and trying to imitate their humming. Her doll is on the grass under the hollyhocks, and her fairy book is lying on the doorstep, but I cannot find her, and I have called loudly everywhere, yet she doesn't answer."

It was not strange that Randy felt a bit anxious, for as she often said, "One could always see or hear Prue."

The sunny little creature was almost invariably to be seen, watching the bees and butterflies at play among the flowers, reading to Tabby fine tales from the fairy book, fishing in the brook with Johnny Buffum, the two little anglers armed with bent pins and a spool of thread, or sitting beside Mrs. McLeod listening to her stories and threading her needles. If for the moment she was out of sight, one might, by listening, hear a merry little tune and easily trace the singer. This time she was not to be seen, nor was

listening rewarded with a sound of her sweet voice.

"Supper's all ready, Mis' Weston," announced Philury, "an' do ye set daown, 'stead er worryin' baout Prue, fer I'll run aout an' be huntin' fer her while yer eatin'."

Suiting the action to her words, she hastened out on what proved to be a fruitless search, for she returned to say that Prue was not to be found in any one of her favorite haunts upon the farm.

Then Mr. Weston, Randy, and Philury resumed the search, each going in a different direction, but when all had traversed the portion allotted, they met at the farmhouse door, and neither had found Prue.

"I'm 'baout wild!" said Mrs. Weston, and the Squire, for once, had no comfort to offer. Taking his hat and walking stick, he turned toward the door, when, in the gloom of the twilight, a little figure ran in to greet him.

"Look, father, look!" she cried, "see the pretty boat Orlando's just finished for me.



A SILENT GROUP, THEY WATCHED THE ILLUMINED SKY *Page 111*



It took him all the afternoon to whittle it, but it's beautiful, isn't it? He's got a little sister Gretchen in Germany, an' he used to make boats for her like this one. Why don't you look at my pretty boat, father?" she asked in surprise, for the Squire, who held her in his arms, was looking beyond her, and over her head. He looked again, then turning he said: "Wife! wife! The mill's on fire!"

They rushed to the door and looked out. The sky, which at twilight had been of a leaden hue, now burned with a dull red glare, which from time to time streamed higher, as if a giant were fanning the flames.

A silent group, they watched the illumined sky; even Prue could find no words to express her thoughts, as wide-eyed and wondering she clung to her mother's hand. At last Mr. Weston broke the silence.

"Bless me! What on *airth* holds me here, when I ought to be daown at the mill a-tryin' ter lend a hand?" he exclaimed, drawing his

hand across his brow as if waking, yet bewildered by a hideous dream.

The group in the doorway stood watching the sky long after Mr. Weston had left them, and scarcely a word was spoken until later the waning color told that the fire was burning lower. Then, a quiet little group, they sat talking of the old mill, which had been standing ever since they could remember; of Martin Meers, and the probable cost of rebuilding; of the discontented men whose contention had made their daily intercourse anything but pleasant; of the time which must necessarily elapse before they could, even if they chose, resume work together.

Even Philury's hilarious spirit was subdued. The burning of the mill was not a matter to be thought of lightly, and with little Prue upon her lap, she sat looking out at the sky until a slow step upon the walk caused her to start, and Randy hastened toward the door.

"Why, father!" she exclaimed, "I didn't

know your step. Did they save any of the mill? ”

“Burnt to the ground,” he answered, “an’ Meers is wild ter know who set it. What, Prue not in bed yet? Well, p’raps it’s just as well this time. Come here to me, and bring your pretty boat. I couldn’t look at it when ye tried ter show it ter me, but I’ll see it naow.”

Mrs. Weston looked at her husband in amazement. Why should he, who had but just returned from the burning mill, have so little to say about it? why did he so eagerly ask to see Prue’s new toy? She had not long to wonder. Taking his little daughter upon his lap, he examined the little craft which she placed in his hands, saying gently:

“That’s a pretty boat, Prue, a very nice little boat. Naow, little girl, ye say Orlando Steubenreiser made it fer ye? How long was he ’baout it? Try and remember.”

“Oh, *ever* so long,” answered Prue, “all the afternoon, an’ ’til ’most dark. We sat

down by the big nut tree at the end of the lane, an' I watched him make it. He just got it done, and walked 'most to our door with me, when I run in to show it to you, an' you couldn't look at it 'cause you said the mill was burnin'."

"Naow, Prue, you must remember what ye've jest said, that it took him all that time ter make it, an' he was back here at the door with ye when we see the light in the sky. Somebody may ask ye, little daughter, ef ye know where he was this afternoon, an' I want ye should remember."

"Oh, I *couldn't* forget," said Prue, "'cause he made my little boat for me."

"The taown's agin him, Prue; ye must be his little friend," said her father.

"I *will*," Prue answered, so firmly that Randy and her mother leaned forward to scan the little face.

"Did anything else happen ter make ye remember this day?" he asked, as if anxious to strengthen the child's memory.

"Oh, yes," said Prue. "Orlando made

my boat for me, an' Philury fried me a doughnut boy an' a doughnut girl, an' when Bob Witherspoon ran in to ask where you was, Philury telled him you was down in the meadow, but she spilled a whole lot of doughnuts on the floor when he hollered in the doorway."

"Randy, mother, Philury! Ye must remind Prue of this often, so she won't ferget," said Mr. Weston.

"I *do* 'member, so how could I forget?" said Prue, as, with her hand on Randy's, on the way upstairs she turned to assure her father that her memory was infallible.

CHAPTER VII

REUBEN JENKS ENTERTAINS

“ I THINK, Reuben, its ’baout time ye took a hand at ent’tainin’,” said Mrs. Jenks one morning as they were gathering the sweet apples which a stiff breeze had ruthlessly stripped from the trees. They had been scattered broadcast, and Reuben, endeavoring to gather a basketful of the finest, was not aware that his mother had spoken.

“ Wal, what do ye say? ” she exclaimed, surprised at receiving no answer.

“ What is that, mother? ” Reuben asked, as he placed his well-filled basket upon the grass and turned to toss a large, fair specimen into the basket which she was filling.

“ Oh, ye didn’t hear me? Wal, I said I thought ’twas ’baout time we did a little ent’tainin’. School’s ’baout ter begin, an’ ’fore ye know it, Jotham ’ll be off ter Cam-

bridge, an' I think 'twould be the right thing ter have a social gatherin', say in the big barn here, with a spread in the haouse, an' invite as many 's the barn 'll hold. Seems if everybody hereabaouts was depressed with the burnin' of the mill, an' while we're all sorry fer Martin Meers, an' sorry ter have no mill handy, I do'no's everybody need feel b'liged ter wear a long face fer months. Josiah Boyden is a stumpin' up an' daown the road, a thumpin' the graound with his cane, an' tellin' the gret damage ter him in partic'lar, an' the taown in gin'ral; Timotheus Simpkins has tried ter write a pome abaout the fire, but had ter give it up. He started the first line, 'This village didn't possess no steam fire engine,' an he ran up agin a stump, 'cause nothin' would rhyme with that, so he's all cast daown an' discouraged. His father says it seems 's if the poet's laurel wreath was a loppin'. Sort er wiltin' raound the ears, I s'pose he means," concluded Mrs. Jenks. "So 's I was sayin', let's invite the folks ter jine us in a giniwine

good time, an' p'raps they'll continoo ter feel better fer it."

"Give us yer hand, mother," said Reuben, "ye're always doin' something ter make folks happy. That's a fine idea ter call our friends together, an' have a jollification meetin' in the barn.

"How'd ye like Randy Weston ter help ye? She's always willin' ter take a hand, an' p'raps, seein' 's she spent the winter in Boston, she may be able to give us some points. Not that city folks have their parties in barns," he continued, "but she's so bright I didn't know but she'd be of use to ye. I'll run over an' ask her if ye say so."

Mrs. Jenks turned and looked sharply at Reuben.

"How bright yer face looks, my boy," she said; "it's wuth a deal of effort ter see ye look so cheery."

"Ye used ter be distant-like with me, mother, 'til that summer that Miss Helen Dayton came here," Reuben answered. "Ever since then we have been chums, you

an' I, mother, an' chums we'll continue," and, stooping, he touched her hand with his lips.

"Ye're a reg'lar boy, through an' through," said Mrs. Jenks, "but ye have some gentle ways at times that make ye as great a comfort as a daughter could be," and while a smile quivered upon her lips, a tear lay upon her lashes.

Born with a stern nature which time and toil had strengthened, she often found it difficult to express the love and tenderness which she felt for her son, but when by some little act he showed the warmth of his regard for her, she was more deeply touched than a shallower nature could have been.

It was decided that the party should include young and old, and Sandy McLeod remarked, "'Twill be a gatherin' o' the clans."

When appealed to, Randy gladly agreed to be as useful as possible; Philury Flanders declared that she should offer, since she was included in the Westons' invitation, to help

about the spread on the evening of the party, and Prue promptly invited Johnny Buffum to be her cavalier for the evening.

“You needn’t, if you don’t want to,” she coolly remarked, “’cause Hi Babson’s here visitin’, and he’ll do just as well.”

Johnny was not pleased to think that Hi would be nearly as acceptable, therefore he answered shortly:

“No, Hi Babson *won’t* do as well’s me, Prue Weston, so I’ll be yer comp’ny at the big party myself.”

Johnny was a valiant knight, prepared to stand his ground, and keep his wee lady from receiving attention from persistent little Hi, whose pranks had sometimes caused much annoyance to himself and his sister Hitty. Johnny had no idea of helping to make a charming evening for Hi.

The Babson girls were delighted at the prospect of an evening’s gayety; the Langham twins, Molly and Polly, were slightly excited. They were never more than mildly exhilarated.

Immediately upon receipt of an invitation, Mrs. Hodgkins hurried forth to tell of the party, and to talk of anticipated pleasure with all whom she met.

Up and down the village streets, across the square and over the dusty mill-road, across lots to the Simpkins farm, down a lane and around the corner to Parson Spooner's, a little further up the road to Mrs. Small's, and then back to the Centre to Barnes' store, up a steep flight of stairs to the room over the store where Janie Clifton sat sewing. Having asked if the gown upon which she was working was being made to be worn at the party, Mrs. Hodgkins took a hasty leave, and hurried away to interview Mrs. Gray, there, if possible, to learn if the same teacher, Miss Gilman, would have charge of the school, if she would again board at the Gray farm, and also if she could possibly arrive in time for "the Jenks' party."

Up the hill once more to Mrs. Brimblecom's, and across the field to Almira Weeks',

until old Dr. Bushnell declared, "at the rate she's a trottin' naow, ef the party should be postponed for a day er two, Mis' Hodgkins would never be able ter 'scape narvous prostration."

But the party was not postponed, and a brighter, lovelier evening never was seen than the one which Mrs. Jenks had named in her invitations, which Randy had very daintily written for her.

The full moon made the roads as light as day, and the long, dark shadows of the trees swayed in the breeze, making fantastic forms upon the ground, interspersed with broad bands of silver moonlight.

The rattle of approaching vehicles, and the sound of light laughter and merry chatter, told of the arrival of guests, whose honesty and lack of affectation made them eager to arrive early, and willing to have it known that they anticipated the pleasure offered them.

The wide-open door revealed the interior of the barn, its walls hung with green

branches and clusters of wild flowers, and lighted by scores of bright-hued lanterns, which glowed in a manner quite bewildering to many of the guests, who had never seen such showy decorations.

"Here's Randy Weston! Here's Randy and Prue!" shouted a chorus of eager voices, and Randy, holding little Prue's hand, ran in, radiant, and laughing gayly, while Prue exclaimed:

"Yes, here we are! Randy's here, 'cause I bringed her, an' Philury's here, 'cause she comed herself."

Mr. and Mrs. Jenks welcomed the Squire and Mrs. Weston, and turned to greet Sandy McLeod and his dear old wife.

"'Twouldn't be more 'n a halfway party without you 'n Mrs. McLeod," said Reuben, to which Margaret McLeod, laying her hand upon his shoulder, replied:

"It's a rare welcome, lad, an' I ken we'll try weel tae merit it."

"Ay, that we will, Margaret," said Sandy. "Weel, but it wad warm the heart o' a stun

tae see the sunny faces aboot the barn. Look, Margaret! wee Prue is speakin' tae ye."

"Why, bless the bairn! An' were ye a sprite that I didna see ye?" said Mrs. McLeod, taking Prue's little hand in her own.

"I just wanted to ask you to look at my new shiny shoes, and to tell you that Mr. Sandy says I've growed a big inch," said Prue.

"'Twas a braw lass, indeed," said Mrs. McLeod, "a-growin' like a rare flower, an' as tae the shoon, nae wonder they please ye. I ne'er saw finer."

The old lady watched her as she skipped away to join the other children.

"Her heart's light as air," she murmured; "may it e'er be filled wi' sunshine, for the joy she brought tae me," and with her eyes filled with the light of love, she turned to look at her dear old Sandy, where a ring of laughing boys and girls danced about him, loudly clamoring for a story.

In one corner under an enormous red lan-

tern stood Josiah Boyden, enlightening the group of men before him as to his position in the town, and his importance generally. He considered himself mentally and socially above his listeners, and to enforce this fact he had mounted a small keg, upon which he had been sitting, and, with what he considered appropriate gestures, proceeded forcibly to state his position.

Some, open-mouthed and impressed, listened attentively to the speaker; others grinned derisively and nudged their neighbors. Old Nate Burnham drew nearer to the group around Boyden, and, with hands clasped behind his back, seemed to be an absorbed listener.

“Naow, I’m by all odds the most important man in the taown, bein’ eddicated an’ possessed er means, an’ when it comes ter talkin’ er village improvements, my opinion should be axed fust; then ’twould be time ’nough ter see what other folks thinks.”

“H—m!” remarked Nate loudly.

Boyden looked that way, and the red lan-

tern bobbed and swayed above his head. Hearing no further remark, he continued:

“There’s some talk er fixin’ up the church at consid’able expense, an’ whitewashin’ the ceilin’s of the parsonage—all on ’em ’stravagant idees. Then some on ’em wants a stun waterin’ trough in the square; a wooden one’s good ’nough, I say. Ter speak truthfully, I’m ’nough sight the biggest toad in the puddle, an’ my ’pinion’s val’able. I say stun’s too expensive, an’ wood’s good ’nough; wood ’ll hold aout ’til——”

Crash! The top of the keg had played the speaker false, in that it failed to “hold aout” until he had finished his speech.

“That’s the time wood didn’t stan’ by ye, Josiah,” squeaked Nate Burnham. “I guess a stun keg would er held ye better, bein’s yer somewhat solid.”

“Keep still, can’t ye?” roared Boyden. “Didn’t ye never see a feller slip afore?”

“Oh, yes,” assented Burnham, “lots on ’em, but ’tain’t often we see such a elevated pusson as you be a-takin’ a notion ter flop.”

Josiah Boyden was well aware that others besides Nate Burnham were amused. A nail on the edge of the keg had torn his trousers, and, at the same time, scratched his ankle, but the tiny nail thrust was as nothing compared with the wound which his vanity had received.

“Why,” he questioned, “had his friends considered his ignominious descent from the keg mirth-provoking? Was it ludicrous that a prominent citizen should suffer a mishap?” He arose stiffly and hobbled toward the door. His slight scratch would have permitted him to walk without limping, but he preferred to consider himself injured, and to pose as one abused, therefore he refused to listen to Mrs. Jenks as she urged him to stay, and he stumped out into the darkness, banging the door behind him.

The gayety did not abate with his departure; rather it seemed to gain added zest, and the evening breeze, sweeping through the open windows, swayed the bright-colored lanterns, and stirred little gusts of perfume

from the sweet wild flowers which graced the walls. Jack Marvin, as usual, an escort for the Langham twins, stood between the two girls, smiling impartially upon each. They had been his neighbors for a year, during which time he had been quite unable to decide which he preferred. His cousin Dot, or Dorothea, as she chose to be called, declared that Jack had grown thin trying to determine which one was the more charming, Molly or Polly.

Jack usually retaliated by asking Dot the cause of *her* thinness, a question which usually silenced her. She was extremely sensitive because of her exceedingly stout figure.

Randy and Jotham had been promenading, Jotham praising the decorations which Randy had designed. In the shelter of some branches of heavy foliage they sat down upon a long wooden bench, and Jotham turned to look at the girl beside him. Quite unaware of his scrutiny, Randy watched the merry party, and, like a vision, she seemed to see the drawing-room at Helen Dayton's

home in Boston. Again she was helping receive, once more she saw the lights and heard the music, and Jotham, in evening dress, making his way toward her.

Randy turned quickly as Jotham said:

"Of what were you thinking, Randy? Were you, like myself, dreaming of the winter spent in Boston?"

"Oh, Jotham," she whispered, "for the moment I was at the party which Miss Dayton gave for me."

"Just where I was," said Jotham. "I was thinking of a sweet girl dressed all in white, with a single rose in her hair."

Randy looked down at her gown.

"Oh, it doesn't matter about the dress," he said, "you are Randy, our Randy, whether the frock be pink like this one, or white like the one you wore at the party."

A noisy little troop paused in front of them, but Randy and Jotham, partly shadowed by green branches, were unobserved by the children.

"Now, Johnny Buffum, you just walk

with me a little while," said his small sister Hitty. "You've walked with Prue a long time now."

"Jotham walks raound with Randy, an' I'm goin' ter walk with Prue," answered Johnny stoutly.

"Well, I'm your sister," said Hitty.

"Randy ain't Jotham's sister," remarked Johnny.

"But he just walks with Randy 'cause he ain't got any sister," argued Hitty.

Randy blushed as Jotham said:

"Now you know why you are honored with my company."

"You just walk raound with Hitty," said Hi Babson; "I'm a-walkin' side er Prue myself," and he marched away, triumphant.

Randy and Jotham laughed heartily as Prue trudged along with Hi, disconsolate little Johnny lagging behind with his sister Hitty.

"'None but the brave deserve the fair,'" said Jotham.

Belinda and Jemima Babson were chat-

ting with Reuben Jenks, and Phoebe Small was much elated, having the rare delight of enjoying the society of Mr. Jack Blentmore, the artist, whom Mrs. Jenks had especially invited. He seemed to be enjoying the evening, and Phoebe, looking up at his handsome dark face, wondered if his apparent pleasure were genuine.

“This must seem so different from the parties which you usually attend in the city?” she ventured shyly, the sentence ending with a rising inflection which implied a question.

“That is just why I am enjoying it,” he answered kindly; “it is different, just as you are unlike the average city girl. It is novelty which charms,” and Phoebe was enraptured.

Mrs. Jenks and Mrs. Potts were standing near the doorway engaged in conversation, when Jotham joined them.

“Have you noticed the decorations, mother?” he asked; “Randy designed them, and I think the effect is charming.”

"We were just speaking of her," said Mrs. Potts. "Mrs. Jenks said she could never have made the old barn look so fine without Randy's help."

"She's a lovely girl," said Mrs. Jenks; "but, Jotham," she continued, "I thought I see her a minute ago a-walkin' 'baout with ye."

"Randy was with me," said Jotham, "but she saw Grandma Small sitting alone, and looking a bit lonesome, and she ran away to talk with her. 'You can easily find someone to talk to and she can't,' she said."

"Naow, ain't that just like Randy?" said Mrs. Jenks. "She's a reg'lar sunbeam, that girl is," and in his heart Jotham repeated, "A regular sunbeam."

Grandma Small was delighted when she saw Randy's smiling face and heard her cheery greeting, and she agreed with Randy that the party was a success, quite forgetting that a moment before she had been feeling very lonely, and wondering why she had

been induced to come. Seeing Randy chatting with Grandma Small, Phoebe suddenly realized that she was guilty of neglect, and with Jack Blentmore made her way to where the two were sitting. The young artist was every inch a gentleman, and he soon was talking to the old lady, listening deferentially when she spoke, and answering her quaint questions so seriously, that Phoebe never dreamed that he was amused.

“Did ye say that city folks often pay good money fer picturs, jest picturs?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” Jack replied, “they seem to think they need them.”

“Massy sakes!” the old woman ejaculated, lifting her hands in surprise. “Naow, take that pictur ye’re paintin’ of our Phoebe,” she continued, “haow much ought that ter bring—that is, if someone felt able an’ willin’ ter buy it?”

“Oh, grandma! sh—h,” said Phoebe, but grandma was determined to receive an answer to her question, and she paid no heed to Phoebe’s warning whisper.

Jack Blentmore laughed pleasantly.

"That depends upon two things, Mrs. Small," he said; "how much the party who wishes to possess the picture is willing or able to pay."

"But what would be jest a fair price for it?" persisted his questioner.

"Well, I hope, if I am lucky, to part with it for five hundred; I should like more, but I'd accept that sum if it were offered me."

Grandma Small's mouth opened wide, and her eyes were fixed upon Jack Blentmore with an expression of utter bewilderment. She tried to speak, but the magnificence of the sum, as it seemed to her, had caused her to wonder if the young man could be joking. Again she essayed to speak, and this time her words were barely audible.

"Five hundred dollars!" she gasped.

"Why, yes, that is the price which I have fixed upon, although perhaps I shall do better," he replied. His face did not betray the amusement which he felt.

"Wal, the idea! Who'd ever think it?"

said the old lady. "Not but what it's a pooty pictur, an' jest like aour Phoebe, but what 'stonished me was the idee that anybody 'd pay half the price of the mortgage on our church for a single pictur. Wal! wal! but city folks is queer! I guess, though, I'll say I like ye, young man, an' I wish ye luck, an' ef anybody's goin' ter pay such a fort'n' fer a pictur, I hope he'll buy yourn."

Jack Blentmore grasped the toil-worn hand which she extended, and there was a suspicion of moisture in his eyes as he said frankly:

"I thank you for your kind wishes; they ought to bring me luck." He smiled, and Grandma Small looked up at him with approving eyes. He could not at that moment have analyzed his emotions; they formed a combination of genuine admiration for the kind old face, and a gentle pity for one whose life had, perforce, been spent in a locality where petty economies and frugal planning were the price of existence.

In the center of the floor the children had

joined hands, and Hi Babson, handkerchief in hand, was running wildly around the ring thus formed, intent upon dropping his bit of linen behind Prue, but Prue watched him too closely, and he was obliged to favor another little damsel. Groups of laughing girls and their gallant escorts chattered like flocks of sparrows, and their elders, quite as gayly, talked and laughed until the tuning of old Nate Burnham's "fiddle" caused them to pause and turn that way.

"Choose yer partners! Clear the floor! Mis' Jenks an' her good man be a-goin' ter lead the Country Dance," shouted Nate, from his perch upon a barrel, and no one waited for a second invitation. The strains of "Fisher's Hornpipe" were too enticing to be resisted, and Randy and Jotham, Reuben and Belinda, Jack Marvin (oh, to think of it!) obliged to dance with *one* of the Langham twins, Dot Marvin with Phoebe Small's cousin Jim, Phoebe with Jack Blentmore, who considered it an experience to relate to his dearest chum when

once more in Boston; the Squire and Mrs. Weston, and, yes, pretty Miss Gilman, the teacher, with Parson Spooner's nephew; Joel Simpkins and Janie Clifton, and many more tripped through the dance with light hearts and lighter feet, and Nate zealously plied his bow, and alternately chuckled and shouted his calls.

In a corner the children emulated their elders, and skipped about to the lively music, keeping excellent time, although the figures which they executed were original, in fact, quite unlike any which had ever been danced before.

Nate Burnham knew naught of modern dancing music, but "Yankee Doodle," "Fisher's Hornpipe," "Money Musk," and "Devil's Dream" he had played for years, and he considered himself an accomplished musician.

Faster and faster the music led them; dance followed dance in rapid succession, and sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks proved the exhilaration of rhythmic motion.

At length Nate shouted a welcome announcement:

“Mis’ Jenks says we’ll ’journ ter the haouse fer a spread.”

Eagerly they had grasped the opportunity to dance, and with even more enthusiasm they sped toward the house to taste the good things which they knew would grace the table, for Mrs. Jenks was noted far and wide as being a fine cook.

The hostess stood at the head of the table, with Philury Flanders at her right, to assist in serving. Randy insisted upon helping Philury, and in so doing she found a place for a little girl who was in danger of being pushed about by the small but energetic boys; cajoled Johnny Buffum into giving his chair to old Mrs. Brimblecom by promising to keep his place beside Prue for him until he should return and claim it; she procured a cup of tea for Dr. Bushnell, whom Philury had quite innocently overlooked, and indeed, as Jotham remarked:

“As usual, Randy, you’ve made every-

body happy. Now come with me, and I will take pleasure in serving you;" and as she looked at the smiling faces around the table, Randy was truly happy, because, of all the party, not one had been neglected.

The tempting food disappeared as if by magic, and Philury made many trips with her tray heavily laden with more good things until at last she exclaimed, with a merry laugh:

"It's lucky ye danced 'fore supper, fer there won't be many of ye that 'll feel like hoppin' 'raound after this treat."

"That's so, Philury; I'll take a piece er pie," remarked Jabez Brimblecom, as usual mingling demands for food with his conversation. When at last the jolly party took leave of the hostess, their frank expressions of delight and appreciation of the evening's pleasure amply rewarded Mrs. Jenks for the toil of preparation, and as she turned from the doorway, after the last guest had departed, she exclaimed:

"Wal, father! Reuben! What do ye

say? It seems ter me I'm well repaid. They just enjoyed themselves, an' so did we."

"Mother, ye're a first-rate ent'tainer," said Reuben, laying his arm lovingly about her shoulders.

Reuben Jenks, the elder, took her hand in his as he said, "An' a household an' neighborhood blessin'."

CHAPTER VIII

AN EVENT IN THE VILLAGE

WHEN Josiah Boyden had spoken so vehemently against the placing of a stone trough in the square, declaring it to be an unwarranted extravagance which the "*seelectmen*" should denounce, he did not dream that generous, kind-hearted old Sandy McLeod had offered to present it as a gift from himself and his Margaret.

Boyden did not object to a better trough, but he felt it to be his duty to frown upon any village improvements which might increase his tax-bill, and fearing that one luxury added would make room for another, he had decided to promptly combat any suggestions relating to the disbursement of the town's money.

Sandy and Margaret had talked the matter over, and one sunny day they drove to a

distant town and gave their order for the trough.

When Josiah Boyden learned how mistaken he had been, he understood why, during his speech at the Jenks' party, some of his listeners had smiled so broadly.

"Wal!" he remarked dubiously, "I s'pose it's generous on 'em ef they want ter do it, but I shouldn't wonder ef it sort er 'ncouraged a notion ter think nothin' good 'nough, 'n want everything 'baout taown changed."

"An' ef some er the folks raound 'baout here gits an idee that a few things *needs* changin', an' hustles ter help the thing along 'stead er kickin' agin improvements, we'll git a pooty good-lookin' village 'fore ye know it," remarked Nate Burnham, as he knocked the ashes from his pipe and appeared to be addressing space.

"Ye hain't got no prop'ty ter be taxed," said Boyden; "so ye don't keer haow high taxes be."

"'F I *had* prop'ty ter pay taxes on, I'll be

baound I'd know 'nough ter want ter own it in a decent village. I'd think 'twould be more val'able, so ter speak, ef 'twas sitiuated in a prosp'r'us-lookin' taown," replied Nate.

Sandy McLeod's generosity was not unappreciated, however. The news that the old moss-grown, water-logged, wooden drinking-trough was to be replaced by a fine one of stone, and that it was to be the gift of the dear old couple whom everyone loved, was announced one morning at Barnes' store, and like ants running from an anthill, the assembled newsmongers hastened forth to tell what they had heard.

At a bend of the mill-road an old gnarled apple tree leaned over the wall, as if extending a greeting to all who passed. Its tiny dwarfed fruit showing between the leaves blushed faintly where the loving sun had kissed it, and Sandy McLeod, leading a chestnut mare by the halter, paused, gazing upward, shielding his eyes with his hand.

"A braw bit o' fruit, Heather," he remarked to the horse, "an' like some folk

wha' I'll ne'er mention. The tree makes a show o' muckle fruit, but oh! the taste o' it wad make ye daft wi' its puckerin'. But there's plenty o' gude folks, ef we look for 'em, Heather, an' frae the ithers we'll turn our een.

"Ah, here's the dominie; we're in luck tae meet ane o' the best, after wha' I hae been sayin', Heather."

After greetings had been exchanged, and genial Parson Spooner had inspected and praised Heather's good points, he said, turning to Sandy:

"I have it in my heart to thank you for your generous gift to our little village. Everyone seems delighted that we are to have so useful an ornament at the Centre, and even the beasts will relish a draught of cool water from the new stone trough. I wish, upon my word, they knew enough to thank you."

"Weel, perhaps the patient creatures weel thank me, in their ain way, wi' a neigh here, an' a whinny there," responded Sandy,

“but noo there’s anither thing I’ve kenned o’er mony times. The day the gift arrives, an’ the mon hae set it in place, I’d like a wee bit program, beginning wi’ a blessin’, ye’ll be gude enough tae ask, an’ I’ll whisper in yer ear wha’ I hae planned shall follow yer gude words. I whisper, fer the verra trees seem tae hae ears in this little toon.”

“Well, well!” exclaimed Parson Spooner, “that’s a fine idea, to be sure, and it’s certain to please everyone. Yes, yes, I’ll keep the secret until the day of presentation.”

“And wad it be weel tae tell the gude folk frae the pulpit wha’ day we’ll hae the celebration?” Sandy asked cautiously.

“Why, certainly, I’ll announce it this next Sunday,” said the parson, “and as I am to preach on temperance, I think it will be quite fitting, after the sermon, to announce the presentation of the watering trough.

“Well, what is it, my little man?” he asked, as a little sunburned fellow, in a

checked pinafore and immense straw hat, addressed him.

The youngest of the numerous Buffum family shifted from one bare foot to the other; put one finger in his mouth and took it out, only to replace it with another; peeped from under his hat brim at the parson, and promptly looked down upon the ground again. The good man's smile was reassuring, but Tommy's shyness was overpowering, and the words would not come.

"Well, Tommy, what is it?" questioned the parson, "or have you forgotten what you intended to ask?"

Tommy summoned all his courage. "My sister Hitty jest said Parson Spooner knew everything there was to know, an' I said——"

Evidently Tommy's bravery was oozing.

"Well, what did you say?" the parson asked, with a deal of effort stifling a laugh.

Tommy looked up at the kindly face, and judged that he might safely proceed.

"I said, I guessed there might be some



“WELL, TOMMY, WHAT IS IT?” QUESTIONED THE PARSON *Page 146*

teenty thing what you hadn't learned, an' she said I darsen't ask you!"

Tommy drew a long breath. The words were out, and the good man's hand had not descended in wrath upon him. Sandy and the clergyman joined in a hearty laugh, and Tommy stared in utter bewilderment that his speech should have been received in such an hilarious manner.

Checking his merriment, Parson Spooner said:

"You may tell your sister Hitty that there are many, many things which I have not yet learned, and never expect to."

Tommy waited no longer, but darted off, shouting gleefully.

"Hooray! hooray! Hitty, I was right. The parson says they's a lot er things what he don't know. I guessed right, 'cause I was a boy." To which the discomfited Hitty, from her hiding-place behind the wall, remarked:

"Wal, ye needn't holler so, anyway. I wouldn't have asked him."

Tommy considered this remark unkind, in view of the fact that Hitty had dared him to ask the question, but he refrained from taunting her, contenting himself with thinking that, as usual, he knew "more 'n Hitty did."

On the following Sunday the parson, as he had promised, announced from the pulpit the date which Sandy McLeod had chosen for the presentation.

"We wish to have as large a number as possible present," he said. "The exercises will be very interesting, and I will ask one and all to tell any friends who chance to be absent from church to-day the date and hour as I have given it, and urge them to assemble in the square at that time."

With such a will did they do the parson's bidding, that when the afternoon arrived the little square had as large a crowd as it could well hold, many of whom had driven in from other towns, "ter see the gret doin's," as they expressed it. Some stood about in little groups; others sat upon the

steps of Barnes' store, or leaned against the fence in the shadow of the willow tree, and all were talking of Sandy McLeod's generosity.

"I move we try ter git him ter take a farm over in *aour* town," said an old farmer, with a chuckle, "he's that generous, he's baound ter do fer whatever place he lives in."

"Ye'd find his neighbors wouldn't let him go," was the laughing response; "they know 'nough ter prize him here."

Some of the small boys perched in the branches of the trees about the square, thus gaining an unobstructed view.

"What they goin' ter do?" asked little Johnny Buffum of Hi Babson, who sat beside him upon a sturdy branch.

"I do'no'," Hi answered, "but whatever 'tis, we're baound ter see it from up here where we be. Look! look!" he shouted a moment later. "There's a brass band like what we seen with the circus percession! Where'd they come from? What does it say on the drum?"

The band, a typical country band, was composed of as varied types as could possibly have been gotten together. Short and tall, fat and slender, all clad in an attempt at a uniform, yet each with a coat different from that worn by his neighbor, they presented a motley appearance, but in the eyes of the assembled crowd they were imposing, and Hi barely escaped a fall from the tree as he leaned recklessly forward in an attempt to learn the name of the town whence the musicians had come.

The huge red-faced man who, with the aid of a small boy, carried the bass drum, turned sharply about, thus hiding the name of the town, which was painted in gorgeous lettering upon the drum-head, and Hi Babson and Johnny Buffum were obliged to be content with considering the home of the band a mystery, and Hi confided to Johnny that when he grew up he should play the bass drum. Hi watched the men with the greatest curiosity, and Johnny found them no less interesting.

“See that tall feller a-peekin’ inter his brass horn,” said Hi, giving Johnny a vigorous nudge. “What do ye s’pose he’s a-lookin’ fer?”

“Oh, look at him naow!” said Johnny; “he’s a-tippin’ it upside daown, a-tryin’ ter empty suthin’ aout. What *could* be in it?”

“I do’no’,” Hi answered, his black eyes twinkling, “but if I’d er had the chance, there’d been *beans* in it, I tell ye.”

And now the tall figure of Parson Spooner appeared, and, hat in hand, he mounted the tiny platform which had been erected. With much tenderness he spoke to the assemblage of the duty which each owed the town in which he lived, reminding them that while it was possible for but few to make fine gifts, all were able to lead blameless lives, thus setting a fine example to the little ones about them; to do gentle deeds of kindness, to keep their children in school as long as possible, thus insuring citizens who were not ignorant, and then he lifted his face toward

Heaven, a sweet smile parting his lips as he asked a blessing. Not a head remained covered, and even incorrigible Hi Babson was impressed.

“He looks some like a angel what’s in a pictur in a book what ma’s got,” he whispered to Johnny, and indeed the boy was not far from right. The good man’s face was radiant, and his white hair, touched by the sunlight, seemed a halo about his head. A hush followed his words—then a murmur of voices as each asked his neighbor what he “s’posed would come next.” Again Parson Spooner’s voice was heard.

“Dear friends, I think we are ready for the music,” he said, motioning to the band to come forward. And how they played! The man with the drum grew redder, as he seemed to be making heroic efforts to burst the drum-head, and Hi grasped Johnny’s arm as he whispered excitedly:

“Look at the man with the big brass horn! His cheeks is ’most bustin’, an’ the feller a-tootin’ on that long thing—jest see

his eyes a-stickin' aout! I tell ye, I *will* play in a band when I'm a man."

Johnny's answer betrayed his strongest trait.

"Looks 's though it might be pooty hard work," he drawled.

Uproarious applause followed the music, and the delighted musicians smiled broadly, so charmed were they with the compliment. Again a hush prevailed, and just as everybody was wondering what to expect, Parson Spooner appeared, making his way through the crowd. He was leading someone by the hand, someone very sweet and winsome, who, clad in white, and blushing softly, took her place upon the platform.

"Oh, it's Randy, Randy Weston," cried Hi Babson, from his perch in the tree, and many a voice echoed softly:

"Randy, Randy Weston."

Jotham, his dark face flushed and eager, placed a large bunch of white roses in her hand. She smiled as she took them, and

turning, looked upon the sea of upturned faces.

The Squire and his wife, with little Prue, looked eagerly toward the slender, graceful figure. They wondered if she could, without faltering, perform her task. Prue was not nervous. "Could not Randy do *anything?*" she thought.

The parson lifted his hand for silence, then he said:

"Dear friends: We thought it fitting that a young girl should present this gift, and the generous donor, Mr. McLeod, has chosen Miss Randy Weston, with whom you are all well acquainted."

"Three cheers for Randy!" shouted Reuben Jenks, and three times three they gave, Johnny Buffum coming in with a prolonged "Hooray!" after all the other voices were silent.

Randy stepped forward, and gazed a moment upon the smiling faces before her, then she said:

"I shall not attempt to make a fine

speech, I am very sure that I could not if I tried, but I can give Mr. McLeod's message, which is a welcome to all, whether of our own townspeople, or friends or strangers who visit our little square, to use his gift as freely as if they themselves had purchased it, and thus show their appreciation. He is kind to all whom he meets, and thoughtful for the welfare of the beasts in his care. He asks that his gift shall ever remind you that your dumb servants often suffer with thirst."

Drawing a few of the snowy blossoms from the cluster, Randy lifted them high in air, letting them drop into the cool water of the trough.

"I have strewn it with flowers," she said. "May its water ever be as pure and unsullied as the white blossoms which now float upon its surface. Now it has become the property of our dear little village." She smiled, but tears filled her sweet eyes as the crowd cheered her to the echo.

Jotham and Reuben escorted her gal-

lantly to where the Squire and her mother awaited her.

"I'm proud of ye, Randy. That's better than a written speech," said her father, taking her hand, while her mother kissed her tenderly, saying only:

"Oh, Randy dear."

Prue capped the climax.

"You was better than the whole band er music," she said.

The band played another selection, but the little group of friends around Randy cared only to talk with her, and when the music had ceased, another friend waited to congratulate her. It was Sandy McLeod, who grasped her hand firmly as he said:

"Ah, ye bonnie lassie, ye honored the gift an' the day, an' mysel', an' I thank ye fer doin' weel the pretty task I set ye. Ye never fail us, lass. Ye always do weel wha' we ask, an' my Margaret here is waitin' fer a word wi' ye."

"Ay, that I am, child, an' like my Sandy

I say ye honored us. Heaven bless ye, lass, and grant ye sweetest gifts."

"Amen!" said Sandy, snatching off his Scotch bonnet and bowing gravely.

Then a bevy of girls and boys surrounded Randy, and when, at last, they turned toward home, the laughing friends in their wagons and carriages formed a gay procession, which escorted the Westons nearly to their door.

It had been an exciting day for Randy, and although outwardly calm, her heart beat faster as she thought how generously, how lovingly all her friends had rallied about her to offer congratulations. Her graceful little speech had been a success, in that it had pleased all who had heard it. The loving commendation of our dear ones and our friends makes the crowning joy of our little triumphs.

During the ride home Prue had nestled closely in the shelter of Randy's arm, and she seemed to be thinking deeply, apparently

upon something which she could not quite determine.

Randy, caressing the white roses which lay in her lap, did not notice how unusually quiet and thoughtful Prue seemed to be. Just as they stopped at the door, the little girl turned impulsively toward Randy as she said:

“Why, why didn’t I ’member? I’ve been tryin’ to think, an’ now I know who ’tis you looked like when you talked to all those peoples, and held your roses up so high an’ let them drop in the water. You looked just like the Goddess er Liberty on the cover of my geography, only you didn’t have a big flag winded ’round you. I ’most wish you had, ’though you *couldn’t* looked nicer, could she?” she asked eagerly.

“I don’t think our Randy could have been improved,” said Mr. Weston, and Prue was satisfied.

When after the presentation Phoebe Small had joined the group around Randy,

her words had been very kind, but while she had spoken pleasantly, her voice and manner had lacked enthusiasm, and her congratulation had evidently cost her an effort.

She was fond of Randy and, in a way, glad of her popularity, but she was a girl who had ever wished to be conspicuous, and, possessed of a jealous disposition, she could not joyously greet the friend who had so recently been the center of attraction.

Phoebe found some comfort, however, in the fact that an artist had chosen her as a model for a canvas which he intended to exhibit, and that she was the only girl in the village who had ever been thus honored.

A few days later Jack Blentmore, having put the finishing touches upon the picture, announced that he must pack his belongings and return to the city, and Mrs. Small mildly hinted that she had several friends whom she would be greatly pleased to have see it.

“Why not ask them to come in some evening, and have a look at it?” Jack replied,

adding with a laugh, "it will be a bit amusing to listen to their comments."

Curiosity was rife in the village regarding both painter and picture, and on the evening chosen by Mrs. Small her "best room" was filled with a throng which gazed upon the canvas with open-mouthed wonder, asked the most amazing questions, and as Phoebe afterward said "would have driven me wild if Mr. Blentmore hadn't taken it all as a good joke," and indeed, so pleasantly did he answer their questions, that all went away declaring him to be a "daownright good feller."

One old farmer pushed his hat back from his forehead, and standing very close to the picture, squinted his eyes and opened his mouth, as if expecting thus to aid his vision. Apparently the act was not helpful, as he reversed the maneuver, and closed his mouth and opened his eyes. Then taking Jack Blentmore by the hand, he made this comforting remark:

"Wal, young man, it looks 'nough better

'n I thought 'twould when I seen ye aout in the field a-puttin' on the daubs."

Joel Simpkins assumed a patronizing air which amused Jack, and aroused Phoebe's wrath. Ambling toward the picture, with his hands in his pockets, he said:

"I reely think, Blentmore, that that looks pooty good, 'n I'd almost think ef ye'd keep on er tryin' ye'd be able ter paint some picturs as is."

Having expressed his valuable opinion, he walked off to find Janie Clifton, and to tell her in a loud whisper that she was "'nough sight prettier 'n the gal in the pictur," to which Janie replied with a delighted giggle.

The Babson girls expressed the greatest admiration, and Mollie Wilson told Mrs. Small, shyly, that she had never seen anything so lovely. Molly longed to tell the artist of her admiration for his work, but she dared not address him, and she hoped that Phoebe's mother would repeat her words.

One meek little woman walked with a

timid, sidelong gait toward the canvas, and after having looked carefully at every inch of landscape, and at every detail of the figure, she remarked softly:

“H’m! That ear looks real nat’ral.”

Jack groaned. Of all the picture, not a word for fine drawing, color, or likeness! Only the ear interested her! “If that is all she could see, I make bold to remark, Poor woman!” he muttered. But the next was even more exasperating. She nudged her husband vigorously as with a long finger she pointed out this and that in the picture, then turning to Mr. Blentmore she remarked, with the confidence of the ignorant:

“My Obadiah ’ll make a fine artist, I know, fer he’s got it in him, an’ it’s baound ter come aout. I expect he’ll do consid’able better ’n that,” pointing to the canvas, “fer he’s been a-paintin’ picturs on aour barn door with some red an’ white paint that was left over from paintin’ the barn, an’ I don’t need anybody ter tell me that he’s a genius,” she concluded, with a toss of her head.

Jack Blentmore bowed.

“How happy you must be,” he said mildly, “there is nothing so delightful as an absolutely sure thing.”

Randy and Jotham found rare pleasure in studying the picture and talking with the painter and Phoebe, who were standing near it.

When, during the conversation, Jack Blentmore learned that Jotham would spend the winter in Cambridge, he expressed the hope that they might meet again, saying in his genial way:

“Come to my studio, Jotham, and see the picture in its frame. I assure you it will look much finer, and I should be truly glad to see you. I am at home on Thursdays, and here is my card. I hope you will find me.”

“Indeed I shall come. Yours will be the first studio I have ever entered, and I shall anticipate the pleasure,” Jotham answered cordially, grasping Jack’s outstretched hand. Then with a smile he added:

“ When I have inspected the picture in its frame, I may be able to write to some of this appreciative audience that the canvas, which looked really quite well here, is almost praiseworthy when seen in a frame.”

The two laughed heartily, and each felt that he had found a new and congenial friend.

CHAPTER IX

OCTOBER DAYS

A SUNNY September followed the summer, and when the first October days arrived a warm yellow tone pervaded the landscape. Field and forest, garden and meadow, looked as if a golden shower had fallen, and in the dried grass the crickets chirped, cheated by warm sunlight into a belief that the summer had returned. A single butterfly floated above the marigolds, possibly wondering why his own color was paler than theirs. A little sparrow perched upon the pinnacle-like mullein, twisting his tiny head this way and that, eying the butterfly as if it were the first which he had ever seen, and as he swelled out his little breast he seemed as if about to say, "Curious fellow that; all wings, and

really nothing to him. Now *I* have wings, and I am also quite a large person when you think of it."

Still gazing aslant at the insect, he uttered some loud little chirps, and appeared chagrined that the butterfly could wing its way across the field without so much as turning to look at his important little self.

The two kittens, Fluffy Jotham and Orlando Steubenreiser, were playing with a bit of dried corn-husk; it was evident that the ponderous names which Prue had given them had not in the least depressed their buoyant spirits, and Tabby, sitting in the sun, blinked fondly at their antics, a picture of motherly pride.

Randy strolled out into the sunshine, walking leisurely down the road, through the stile and across the field, along the well-worn footpath which led to the brook.

Mirror-like and cool it lay, a gem in the heart of the woodland. She held in her hand a branch of yellow leaves, and with it she lightly touched the water, lifting it to

see the bright drops fall, then bending over the brook, she looked long and earnestly at the face reflected there.

"That's a very pretty picture," said a merry voice behind her, "I don't wonder that you look at it."

"Oh, Jotham," Randy answered, "I hope you are not thinking me so silly as to be just looking admiringly at my own reflection."

"I shouldn't call that silly," said Jotham, "because you are well worth looking at; you ought to know that, Randy. But all joking aside, what were you thinking of so seriously?"

"I was wondering if the girl whom I saw in the brook could ever reach the mark which I have set for her," she replied quietly.

"Oh, Randy, Randy, you are humble indeed. Everyone but yourself is satisfied with you as you are, and yet you are placing your standard higher. Well, I too have set a mark which I should like to reach," said Jotham. "Randy, I start for Cam-

bridge to-morrow; this time to enter Harvard. I see the benefit of all the hard work I did under Professor Marden, and now I want your best wishes."

Eagerly Randy placed her hands in his, as she said:

"I wish you all the good things which you hope to achieve, and *all* your friends will wish you success."

Silently he gazed for a moment at the sweet face looking at him with frank and steadfast eyes. Then he said: "I have brought you a little gift, Randy; look at it now and say if it pleases you."

"You are always doing pleasant things for me," said Randy.

Jotham placed a package in her hand and watched the color deepening in her cheeks as she strove to untie the ribbon which held the wrappings. A knot in the ribbon resisted her efforts until a smart twitch loosened it and revealed a wee heart-shaped locket, which made Randy's eyes sparkle.

“For me?” she asked. “Oh, is it truly mine?”

“Your very own,” Jotham answered. “I wanted to be sure that you would think of me, Randy, during the long winter, and with the trinket to remind you, I know you’ll not quite forget.”

“Oh, the beautiful little locket,” said Randy, holding it up that the sunlight might make it glitter; “I’d rather have it than any other gift which you might have chosen. But, Jotham,” she exclaimed a moment later, “you should not have thought that I could forget you. Not one of your friends would do that.”

An odd expression, half wistful, half amused, swept over Jotham’s face, which Randy, still examining the locket, failed to see.

“I have had little leisure this summer,” said Jotham, “and I am going back to the city feeling that I have seen my friends but a few times since I returned in June. I’ve had no time for play. Professor Marden

told me that a summer's hard work with him would be the price of admission to Harvard this year, and I said, 'Then I'll work.' "

"That is just what *I* should have said," said Randy. "I remember that your tutor came to your home very soon after you returned, and how you have worked since then! Truly you deserve your reward. How very important you must be feeling; a Harvard man indeed!"

"More important, possibly, than after I arrive at the college and meet a lot of bright fellows with whom I must compete, for I mean to stand well in my class," he said.

"Again I wish you luck," said Randy, "and while you are striving for honors you may think of your friends here, some of whom the district school will claim, while I shall be a flourishing housekeeper until Aunt Prudence returns."

"Mother told me to-day how wonderfully you were managing Philury, which, by the way, must be quite a task," said Jotham;

“and we think as old Dr. Bushnell says, ‘Randy’s a shining light.’ ”

“But I really *enjoy* it,” Randy replied, “and as to ‘managing Philury,’ she is so willing to do as we wish her to, that she is just a comfort in the home. Aunt Prudence is coming in the spring to visit us, and to see if I am a success as a housekeeper. It will be a high mark to reach *her* approval.”

They had been walking while they talked, and had reached the stile.

“It is good-by now, Randy; I leave early to-morrow morning,” Jotham answered. The note of regret in his voice made Randy look up. She had supposed that his mind was wholly occupied with his plans for the winter’s study, and wondered how aught but cheerful thoughts could fill his heart on the eve of his departure, but so vague was the feeling that it did not find expression in words. Again assuring him of her delight in his gift, Randy smiled as she said:

“We shall all miss you, Jotham. You will be hard at work, and perhaps the time

will pass swiftly." Jotham stood looking after her as she ran up the walk, when suddenly little Prue came hurrying toward him, clasping one of the kittens in her arms. In her haste to reach Jotham she unconsciously held her pet perilously close, and the little kitten squealed for mercy. Prue loosened her clasp upon Fluffy Jotham, saying:

"You mus'n't cry, Jotham dear, for I love you."

Jotham was startled, and exclaimed: "Why Prue, where did you come from, and what were you saying?"

"I just comed from Mrs. Sandy's," said Prue, "where I have been making a call with my kitten what I named for you. I squeezed him too tight just now, but I love him and I telled him not to cry. Did you hear me?" she asked, looking up at Jotham.

"I heard you, Prue," he answered, then with a smile he said:

"I thought you were talking to me."

"But you're a big, brave boy, *you* wouldn't cry," she answered confidently.

Without replying, Jotham lifted Prue in his arms and stood her upon the end of the wall, thus bringing her brown eyes upon a level with his own. One little hand held the kitten against her breast, the other twisted a fold of her skirt as she said:

"Oh, Jotham, what makes you look so sorry in your eyes? I didn't see it before."

"I am going back to Cambridge to-morrow," he said, looking off across the fields.

"But you *like* to be to Cambridge, don't you?" Prue questioned.

"Yes, yes, I shall like to be there," he answered, "only I have to remember that I leave friends behind."

The little girl longed to offer comfort, but was at loss to know what to say, when suddenly her face lighted, and with a bright smile she made an offer which cost her much.

"I'll give you Fluffy Jotham, then you won't be so lonesome," she said; "I'll hate

to see him go, but I've got the other kitten, Orlando Steubenreiser, so you may have Fluffy, but do please take him *quick*, when I ain't looking," and the words ended in a sob.

Jotham placed his arm about the little girl as he said:

"You're a dear little friend, Prue, to even think of giving your pet to me, but I cannot take him. I should not have a nice place for him; so you may *call* the kitten mine, and while I am away take fine care of him for me. Will you like to do that?" he asked gently, lest the child should think her generosity unappreciated.

"Oh, yes, I'll take care of Fluffy for you," she said, with a sigh of relief. Although her offer had been genuine, it was sweet to know that she need not part with Fluffy.

"If I don't give you Fluffy, I'll kiss you good-by, for I love you," Prue declared frankly, and Jotham took the little caress so cunningly offered, and then lifting her down from the wall, hastily said good-by, and was off down the road.

Prue had called him brave, and lest a moisture on his dark lashes should betray a bit of weakness, he made the leave-taking brief, and sped on his way toward home.

One question puzzled Prue extremely, and over and over in her active little mind she turned it.

“If my Randy doesn’t be going to school, why must I? And if Jotham’s got to go to a big, big school, why doesn’t Randy have to?” And thus she put the question to her mother, who laughed heartily as she said:

“Why, Prue, some er yer questions would puzzle a lawyer.”

“Well, anyway, I’d like my school better if my Randy was in it, and so would everybody; Jemima Babson said so, and so did Reuben Jenks,” said Prue; “and I think my Randy *ought* to go just ’cause folks wants her to.”

“Randy is a real comfort to me,” Mrs. Weston replied, “an’ I couldn’t seem ter

spare her. She's doin' just wonderful with the housekeepin', an' she intends ter do a deal er readin' this winter. Miss Dayton has sent her a fine lot er books, fer which we're all thankful, they give aour Randy such pleasure."

"But when she reads she don't talk," objected Prue; "and I'd like her to be in my school with me."

"Naow, Prue, ye must remember one thing," said Mrs. Weston. "Last winter when Randy was in Boston a-goin' ter school, ye used ter come home an' feel reel lonesome 'cause when ye looked raound ye couldn't see her. *Naow*, when school's aout, ye can run home an' find her, an' that ought ter make ye happy."

"Well, it does," said Prue; "but all the same, I'd like her sittin' side er me in school."

There were many other things which Prue found puzzling. When, upon one occasion, Miss Gilman was explaining a problem in fractions to a particularly stupid pupil, she

endeavored to make her meaning clearer by saying:

"Now, Joe, try to tell me which is the larger fraction, one-quarter or one-fifth. If you had a pie, would you have as large pieces if you divided it into fifths as you would if you cut it into fourths?"

Joe scratched his head, and seemed to be doing an amount of figuring upon his slate, when suddenly Prue exclaimed:

"Why, Miss Gilman, Joe don't need a slate an' pencil to divide a pie; mother does it with a knife."

Shouts of laughter greeted this speech, even Joe relaxing his puzzled frown long enough to join in the merriment. Upon her return from school, Prue informed Randy that "Teacher cut her pie with a pencil," and it required much argument to persuade her that Miss Gilman only used the word "pie" to explain the example, and when Randy had finished speaking, the little girl was only half convinced.

"Well, anyway," she remarked; "I think

'rithm'tic is silly. What's the use er 'rithm'tic? Mother don't get a pencil out every time she cuts a pie."

Prue liked school and lessons with Randy near her, but without her sweet companionship the tasks seemed both useless and tedious.

In Hi Babson she found a ready sympathizer, but Hi disliked school for no such tender reason as that which made little Prue's heart heavy. Hi often said that he "hated school, jest 'cause," and that was all the reason which he could be induced to give. He considered the school to be a prison, designed to deprive small boys of their freedom. That a few girls were also obliged to attend did not count. "Girls were different," he said. His restless brain was busy concocting plans for evading school sessions, or for tormenting those who wished to be studious.

One morning Miss Gilman looked about the room, and seeing that all were occupied with their lessons, drew from her pocket a

letter and was about to read it, when Belinda Babson raised her hand.

“Please, Miss Gilman, my little cousin is absent this morning because we couldn’t find him, to make him come.”

“Possibly you will find him at dinner time,” the teacher answered with a smile (Hi’s appetite was a standing joke), “and he can be here this afternoon.”

Once more she opened her letter, and for a time read without interruption. Only the buzzing of many little lips in the primary class as they noisily endeavored to memorize their lessons could be heard. So completely was the young teacher’s mind engrossed with the letter from home that when a rousing knock sounded upon the door she sprang from her chair in sudden panic. Reuben Jenks ejaculated, “Cricky!” and even the imperturbable Langham twins looked a trifle startled.

“Want me ter see who ’t is?” asked one of the larger boys, and Miss Gilman nodded assent.

Joe hastened to the door, and as he opened it, Farmer Babson strode in, literally dragging Hi, who persistently hung back. A broad smile illumined Joshua Babson's face as he said:

"Miss Gilman, this ere pupil er yourn thought best not ter come ter school this mornin', an' hopin' ter dodge both sessions, he hid in the cupboard. He got a leetle tired, an' thought 'twas 'baout dinner time, so he tackled a squash pie and finished it all, 'cept what's left on his face.

"No, don't ye try ter wipe it off!" he commanded, as Hi attempted to draw his sleeve across his face. "I want 'em all ter know what a terrible good time ye had."

Again addressing the teacher, he said:

"It's *my* idee bringin' him a-lookin' so like time. His ma wanted ter wash him up a leetle, but I said no; mebbe he'll think best ter-morrer ter git ready on time, an' 'stead er hidin', come erlong ter school with the rest.

"Ye needn't squirm," Uncle Joshua con-

tinued; "turn raound, Hi, an' let 'em all see ef they ever seen such a sight as ye be, before."

It was impossible for teacher or pupils to refrain from laughing. Not that so much of Hi's treat remained upon his face, but because of the comical expression which the little daubs of yellow gave him. He had evidently striven to devour his treat with all haste, before his hiding-place was discovered, and as a consequence of forcing his chubby face well into the pie, a yellow line ran from the corner of his mouth toward his ears, thus giving the impression of a wide and "golden" smile.

Hi was filled with chagrin, but was his rebellious little spirit cowed? Not a bit of it. Even while his uncle was speaking, he was trying to decide which of two schemes would be most likely to enable him to avoid attending school on the following day.

After Mr. Babson had departed, Miss Gilman sent Hi with Jemima out to the wooden pump, and when the two returned,

the small boy's face was very clean, and as he took his usual seat beside Prue, he looked as if intent upon being a pattern pupil, but Miss Gilman remembered that Hi was not to be trusted, and she watched him closely. Immediately in front of him sat Tommy Buffum, Johnny's younger brother, who was attending school for the first time.

Later, when the teacher was listening to the recitation of the grammar class at the opposite side of the room, Hi looked about for something which might afford him amusement. He intended that Tommy should be the victim of his joke, but what could he do?

Tommy bent his head to closely examine the pictures in his primer, and seeing the space between his collar and his neck, Hi looked in his desk, but could find nothing smaller than a book. In disgust he thrust his hands into his pockets, and almost whistled when he felt some crackers there. Quickly, yet softly, he broke them into bits, and then, taking a large handful, slipped

the dry crumbs down the back of Tommy's neck.

"Wow—ow!" shouted Tommy, grasping his collar and prancing about in the aisle.

Miss Gilman hastened to see what had caused the disturbance.

Tommy was clutching at his collar, and howling wildly.

Hi Babson was suspiciously studious.

"Stop crying, Tommy," said the teacher, "and tell me whc has troubled you."

"Ow—ow!" shrieked the small boy, as every wriggle of his little body caused the dry crumbs to scratch the tender flesh.

"Hi's gone an' put a lot er critters daown my back—ow!"

"Hitty, you and Johnny may take Tommy into the entry and see if you can help him," said Miss Gilman, and when they had gone she said, "Hi, you may come to me!"

Hi obeyed. He dared not do otherwise; not one of her pupils had ever heard her speak so sternly. She had, in every case,

found gentleness, coupled with firmness, all that was necessary to keep order, but Hi Babson was an exception to every rule, and she knew that it was a simple question of rule or be ruled.

“Now, Hi,” she said; “you *can* be a good boy if you will, I know that; but you have chosen to be a bad boy ever since you first came to me.

“I am going to give you your choice now. I have been patient long enough. You may behave yourself well or not, just as you choose, but the first time I find you doing anything mischievous, I shall send word to your uncle Joshua that you need a whipping, and I think he will see that you have it.”

“Hi got a lickin’ last week; I heerd the slaps a-goin’ on, an’ heerd Hi a-screechin’,” volunteered a small urchin in the front row.

Ignoring this valuable bit of information, the teacher continued:

“You heard what I said. Did you understand me, Hi?”

"I'd *orter*," Hi answered, and there was that in his manner which led Miss Gilman to believe that, for a time at least, peace was restored.

There was little more than a year's difference between Johnny Buffum and his sister Hitty, and each was anxious to prove the smarter of the two. Their little exhibitions of rivalry were very amusing, and at times Tommy, the youngest of the three, would attempt to participate in their disputes by telling of his own prowess.

"I'm a-doin' long division, an' you're a-doin' short, so I'm ahead, Hitty," said Johnny one morning; "'n short ain't near so hard 's long."

"You stop braggin', Johnny Buffum," Hitty retorted; "'f I'm doin' short division, I do it *right*. I heard teacher say every one of your sums were wrong yesterday; so now!"

While Johnny tried to think of an answer which should completely crush Hitty, Tommy rushed between them, proudly holding his slate so that both might see.

"This beats yer both," he drawled in his usual deliberate manner.

"My figgers on that top line is most as good as teacher's."

"An' who couldn't make numbers?" exclaimed Johnny derisively.

"You 'n Hitty couldn't," answered confident Tommy; "your sums is done with horrid ol' figgers. When I get ter doin' sums I mean ter make 'em look fine."

"I don't care 'f I only git the answer," said Hitty, but Tommy's pride in his work could not be quenched, and day by day he plodded on, determined to improve upon what he already considered very fine work.

The determination to succeed, and, if possible, to surpass their mates, was not limited to the younger pupils; pride, giving a spur to ambition, led the greater number of pupils to work with a will, and the result was gratifying to the young teacher, who labored to make her school a success. Her classes were made up from boys and girls of all ages, commencing with the tots who were

in their first school year, to those who were well advanced in rhetoric and mathematics. One pupil felt that she had a claim to distinction beyond anything which fine scholarship could give, and whenever a pupil's prowess was especially noticeable, Phoebe would say complacently:

“Yes, she's getting a fine average in her studies, but——”

She would never complete the sentence aloud, but under her breath she would say to herself:

“But she's *never* had an artist paint her picture.”

CHAPTER X

A PRELIMINARY HEARING

MONTHS had passed since the burning of the mill, and while its loss was keenly felt by the villagers, other events claimed their attention, and the charred ruins, which at first attracted many curious pedestrians, had lain for weeks unnoticed, unexplored.

Immediately after the fire, troops of small boys and village loafers had armed themselves with long sticks, and raked over the blackened pile as if expecting to find a fortune hidden there, but as time wore on, and nothing of value was found, their enthusiasm abated, and the spot where once the old mill had stood was deserted. Deserted? One there was who daily found his way there, wandering about as if in a dream, and that was Martin Meers.

On the night of the fire he had stared

helplessly as the flames destroyed the mill, and since that night he had seemed as if stunned by the loss which he had suffered. Possessed of ample means with which to rebuild, he had taken no steps toward reconstructing, and expostulation from wife, son, or neighbors seemed alike unavailing, until one morning, as if awakening from a dream, he turned sharply to his son as he exclaimed :

“ I’m a-goin’ ter build a bigger mill than the one I had afore, an’ I want ye should ride over ter the Centre with me this mornin’, fer fear I’ll change my mind, an’ come home ’thout givin’ the order ter the builders. I’ve been so cast daown ’t I couldn’t seem ter make a start, but naow I’ve ’woke, so ter speak, I guess nothin’ ’ll stop me.”

Mrs. Meers stood in the doorway watching her husband and son as they drove off down the road, and a wordless prayer of thankfulness filled her heart that at last the husband and father, who had ever been kind and gentle at home, had been aroused from

his melancholy, and was once more his cheery, light-hearted self.

One morning the sound of the hammers upon the new building made many hearts glad, and there was much rejoicing that the town was to have a mill of its own. The farmers had begrudged the time required to reach the one in the next village, and they assured Martin Meers that all their grist should come to him as soon as the new building was completed. The men whom Meers had formerly employed had easily found work upon the large farms, but as soon as they learned that the mill was to be rebuilt they signified their desire to quit farming and to again work for him.

Then the prejudice against Orlando Steubenreiser, which had been smoldering, blazed forth in a torrent of accusation, one man going so far as to charge him with firing the mill, asserting that he could prove what he said to be true; and Steubenreiser, stolid creature that he was, neither admitted nor denied his guilt. Always a quiet man,

he seemed to have grown more silent, more reserved. He had come to America when a child, and spoke with only an occasional German accent. It was, however, but seldom that he chose to speak at all, and the open dislike of those about him seemed to have sealed his lips. It appeared as if the entire village had turned against him, yet friends he had, firm friends and true.

While Steubenreiser remained silent, his enemies seemed to be working day and night to injure him, and they besieged Martin Meers, assuring him that the German was at the bottom of the destruction of the mill, and that no honest man would allow such a miscreant to be at large.

Weak, irresolute, longing to protect Steubenreiser, yet fearing the displeasure of his townspeople, Martin Meers wavered. One day determined to protect the man whom he believed innocent, the next fearing that his business would suffer if he failed to listen to the clamor of the people, he hesitated,

and in that moment lost the last bit of strength to withstand their importuning.

In his leather chair in the tiny room which he called his office sat John Everton, familiarly called Lawyer Everton, and as the light from the hanging lamp touched his kindly face, one would have said: "Here is a man who is just and true." His firm mouth weighed its words, yet the lips parted in a bright smile for the children, and while his keen blue eyes could gaze so sternly at a falsifier as to cause him to wince, they could look with warm admiration upon the young man whose ambition led him to struggle for success.

In the doorway, hesitating and irresolute, stood Martin Meers, nervously fingering the brim of the hat which he held in his hand, as he tried to decide whether to take the proffered chair or continue to stand. At loss to understand his unusual diffidence, the lawyer leaned forward and scanned the face before him.

“Well, Martin, what is it?” he asked; “you never seemed like this before. Sit down, sit down, and have it out.”

At that Meers seemed to regain the ability to speak.

“It’s this plaguey bother ’baout Steubenreiser,” said he; “with everybody a-pesterin’ me this way an’ that, I’m ’bliged ter have the feller ’rested I s’pose, ’though I must say I don’t like ter.”

John Everton looked the astonishment which he felt.

“Then why on earth do you do it?” he asked.

“Wal, feelin’ ’s all agin him, as ye know, an’ most folks b’lieves he burnt the mill, an’ they argy that ef he’d burn one thing he’d burn another, an’ that ef that’s the case ’tain’t safe fer him ter be at large,” said Meers, in a manner which plainly showed that he hoped that his explanation would, in some slight degree, excuse his apparent willingness to have the man arrested. A silence, which became awkward, caused

Meers to raise his eyes, when, suddenly leaning forward, Lawyer Everton said:

“Martin Meers, do you believe him to be guilty?”

“N—no,” faltered Meers, “but the folks all ’baout here seem ter ’spect me ter do suthin’ ’baout it.”

Half pityingly, half contemptuously, Lawyer Everton said:

“We will have a preliminary hearing before going further with the case, and, perhaps, that will settle the question of his innocence or guilt, and satisfy his accusers and the public at the same time.”

“Do ye mean ter——”

“You will learn with the rest what I intend to do at the hearing. I have some papers here which call for my immediate attention,” he continued, and Martin Meers thought best to withdraw.

John Everton, standing before his desk, looked after the receding figure and brought his fist down firmly upon the solid oak shelf as he ejaculated:

“Of all the irresolute, characterless, spunkless—well, I believe there are not words enough to describe so good a man as that, who is utterly devoid of New England backbone.”

Although Lawyer Everton declined to talk of the matter until the day set for the hearing; although Martin Meers, when questioned, was persistently silent; the fact became known that there *was* to be a meeting, when, before the stern old lawyer, Orlando Steubenreiser would be forced to say if he were innocent or guilty, and every enemy whom the man could name seemed ready and eager to testify against him.

Excitement ran high, and the stolid German, as he saw the scowling faces and heard the ill-suppressed murmurings of his determined accusers, wondered if, in all the world, there was one whom he could call his friend.

Yes, there was one whose firm friendship he dearly prized, but she was a little winsome child, who had fearlessly, lovingly

trusted him. What could *she* do for him? Would they, these older, wiser, harder-hearted ones be able to make his child friend believe him to be a fire-fiend?

Orlando sighed. In a vague way he hoped that they would leave the little girl unprejudiced; he could not spare her friendship, it was so true, so well worth having.

Little Prue had kept her toy boat most carefully, and whenever, between school sessions, she had taken it to admire its graceful curves and its tiny mast, her father, Randy, or Philury had grasped the opportunity to mention that Orlando had spent the whole afternoon in making it, and that when he had said "Good-night" as she reached the door, they had immediately seen the fire-lit sky.

"I know Orlando made my boat the day somebody made the mill burn," Prue would invariably answer, "and when it was 'most dark he said he'd have to hurry to get it done. He walked way home with me."

A few days before the one chosen for the

hearing Randy was returning from the Centre along a lonely part of the road, and so deep in thought was she that she did not notice a slouching figure which leaned against a tree, and, with a scowling face, watched her approach. She was thinking of Prue and wondering if the little sister would be able to testify so clearly, so positively, as to materially help the German's cause.

"I will stand closely beside her," thought Randy, "and if I hold her hand she will not be afraid."

The Weston family had been formally summoned to appear, and the Squire had explained that as there was such intense prejudice against Steubenreiser, it was necessary, if they wished to help him prove his innocence, that they answer all questions promptly, and give any evidence which they might possess as clearly as possible.

As Randy sped along the road her mind was so filled with thoughts of the hearing before Lawyer Everton that she was wholly

unaware of another's presence until a surly voice addressed her.

"'Spectin' ter cut quite a figger 'fore the lawyer, come Tuesday, ain't ye?"

Randy started at the sound of the gruff voice, and the man laughed as he approached her.

"Goin' ter do yer level best ter save Steubenreiser? They say yer pa means ter, so I s'pose ye'll be likely ter do the same."

Randy looked at the man and hesitated an instant; then she said:

"I shall tell the *truth*."

"Then I'll inform ye that he fired the mill 's sure 's my name 's Dan Marcy, so 'f yer *baound* ter tell the truth, Randy Weston, ye'll tell *that*. Do ye hear?"

Randy made no answer. The man before her was well known and feared throughout the village as a shiftless, graceless fellow whom one would do well to avoid, and she refrained from answering lest her trembling voice should betray her terror.

Dan Marcy was a coward and a bully, and

Randy knew that the least show of fear upon her part would greatly strengthen his courage. She was about to pass him, when he exclaimed:

“Why don’t ye answer, er don’t ye know what ter say? Let me tell ye one thing,” he continued, “yer father means ter stand by Steubenreiser, they say, but I tell ye, *I’ll* land him in the caounty jail; that’s where a lot er people would like ter see him, an’ there he’ll be ef I can manage it, whether he fired the mill or not.”

In a moment Randy’s scorn triumphed over her fear. Turning sharply around and facing the man she said:

“And you would be willing to convict an innocent man?”

Her face was white, and her slender figure seemed taller, as in her anger and scorn she looked into the dark face before her.

Surprise, chagrin, and even a bit of admiration swept over the surly face. For a moment he hesitated, then, without a word,

turned and slouched away, and when the bend of the road hid his skulking figure, Randy turned toward home, her physical strength nearly spent, but her courage and bravery not one whit daunted. Prue ran to meet her.

“Oh, Randy,” she exclaimed, “Philury’s makin’ a Johnny-cake for supper, an’ she let me beat the eggs an put in the m’lasses, so the cake’s part mine. Why, how queer you look, Randy; you look scared or something.”

“I am all right,” Randy answered, with a smile, thus trying to reassure Prue, but the little girl watched her closely, and upon entering the house confided to Philury that her Randy was “tired or something, and not like Randy ’t all.”

Of her encounter with Dan Marcy, Randy said nothing until Prue was safely tucked in bed. She did not wish the little sister to be at all afraid of anyone whom she would have to meet on the morrow.

There were two large rooms over Barnes’

store. One was occupied by Janie Clifton as a dressmaking "parlor," and the other by the "seelectmen," by the school board for committee meetings, and at other times as a reading room in lieu of a library, which the town did not possess.

A bare and cheerless aspect it usually presented, its plastered walls undecorated, and its curtainless windows letting in a flood of sunlight between the branches which tapped softly against the pane. A rude attempt at a bookcase held the few volumes which had been contributed, and, judging from their titles, one would say that the most pronounced kleptomaniac could not be tempted to steal them. A table and a few chairs were its only possessions, but on this sunny morning the greater number present were seated, chairs having been borrowed for the occasion. At the table sat Lawyer Everton, an unusually stern expression upon his fine face.

Little Prue sat upon her father's knee, and looked wonderingly about at the assem-

bled company, while Randy, too nervous to be seated, stood beside the Squire, her hand upon his shoulder. Philury Flanders sat near them, resplendent in a new hat of Janie Clifton's designing. In her hand she firmly grasped a large cotton umbrella, occasionally turning it about that she might allow those near her to study the beauty of its horn handle.

"I'm goin' ter wear my best hat, Mis' Weston," she had said; "cause my mind works better under fine headgear, an' I'll take my ambrill ter pertect me from the showers er eloquence I expect ter hear ef all the good-for-nothin' loafers in this taown has sot their minds on speakin' agin Steubenreiser. I hope Lawyer Everton 'll look at 'em in a way that 'll make 'em feel foolish; tho', come ter think on 't, there's one er two on 'em that couldn't look anything else."

She had laughed when she had made this scathing remark, but when with her friends she sat eagerly waiting for Lawyer Everton

to speak, her hilarity was not in evidence, and her face wore an expression of concern as she glanced from Prue to Orlando, and back again to Prue; and she wondered if the little girl would be frightened when asked to testify. She hoped that the stern old lawyer would fit his questions to the tiny witness.

Jabez Brimblecom sat near the window, his shrewd eyes scanning a group of men who stood near him conversing in undertones, and evidently expressing opinions regarding the probable guilt or innocence of the German.

Steubenreiser sat apart, a stolid expression upon his face, which defied those who wished to read his thoughts. He had picked up two bits of string from the floor, and as if to impress those present with his indifference, or to hide a genuine anxiety which he felt, he busied himself with tying and untying innumerable knots, as if no greater matter hung in the balance.

Prue's eyes roved about the room until

they rested upon her friend, when, turning to her father, she whispered :

“ May I go and talk to Orlando? Nobody else does, and he looks lonesome.”

The child had read what no one else could see.

“ Not jest naow, Prue,” said Mr. Weston, gently ; then, seeing the question in her eyes, he said, “ Ye might disturb the meeting.”

“ But *they* all talks,” said Prue, pointing a wee finger at the group of men ; “ they *all* talks, but not to *him*.”

Before the Squire could answer, Lawyer Everton raised his hand for silence, and Prue, in watching him, forgot to question further.

It was an informal hearing, before a most informal gathering, and briefly, yet clearly, John Everton reminded them that the mill had caught fire at twilight, burning until only bits of charred timbers remained ; recalled the fact that weeks of disagreement among the hands had on that day culminated in a general refusal to work. Then

he spoke of the meeting which had been called in order to have a preliminary hearing, and urged upon them their duty to tell the "truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"You have been unanimous in accusing one man of firing the mill. Have you just cause for doing so?" he asked. "Think before you speak, and say if you can substantiate your charges. It is no light matter to falsely accuse."

Martin Meers, tremulously regretful that he had allowed himself to listen to the murmurings of Steubenreiser's accusers, shifted uneasily from one side of his chair to the other, and felt that he deserved John Everton's admonition quite as much as any man in the room.

There appeared to be no dearth of willing witnesses, but their testimony seemed to consist of wordy efforts to condemn the man, rather than important statements which could justify conviction.

One after another arose to his feet and

ambled through a dissertation upon the probable guilt of the German, but of them all not one could say that he had actually seen the man near the mill on the day of the fire. At last one excited individual arose and exclaimed:

“I want ter see him in jail, Lawyer Everton!”

“That is practically what each witness thus far has said,” said the lawyer; “the only difference is, that you have had the courage to say bluntly just what you mean, while the others have thought best to beat around the bush. It is not enough that you should wish to have your unreasoning prejudice gratified, and strive to place this man in jail by blindly insisting that he set fire to the mill. Such statements are worthless unless you can back them with proof, ample and positive proof, of his guilt.”

An old farmer, whose sharp eyes beneath his shaggy brows had been closely watching the lawyer while he was speaking, arose, apparently in great excitement.

“Look er here, Lawyer Everton! Ain’t it ’nough ter convict a man ef every fifth man in the taown kin swear that the one they *says* is guilty is more *likely* ter er done it than anybody else?” he said.

“Of course not,” cried John Everton vehemently. “If such so-called evidence were sufficient, we could convict *you*, since you have the reputation in town of never feeling kindly toward anyone, and of possessing a willingness to do any mean act which is not actually punishable by law; how are we to know that you did not carry your well-known dislike for Martin Meers a step farther than usual, and in a spirit of malice, fire his mill?”

“I never teched it!” roared the old farmer.

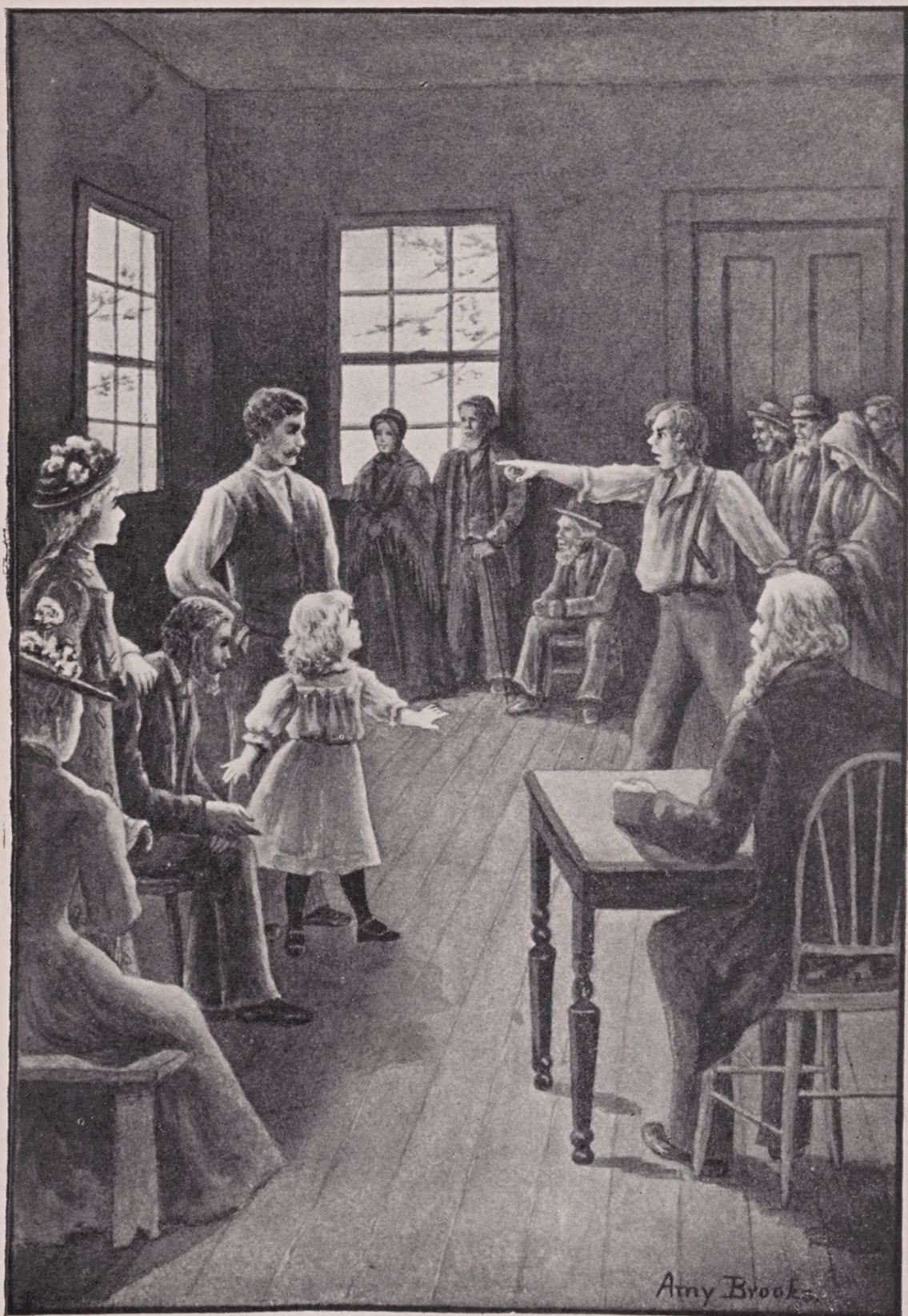
“And I did not accuse you of doing it,” said the lawyer, with a faint smile. “I only attempted to show you that such testimony as you have given would be as worthless to convict one man as another. It appears that you are able to see the point.”

The irate farmer subsided, and Mr. Weston was asked to tell how, on the day of the fire, he had been summoned in the forenoon to leave the meadow to go to the mill and use his influence with the men to induce them to work peaceably together.

Philury Flanders corroborated his statements, and caused much amusement when she told how Bob Witherspoon, shouting at the kitchen door, had caused her to drop her panful of hot doughnuts.

Martin Meers then told of the men's final refusal at noontime to return to work, and that the mill had been closed all the afternoon.

"An' at twilight 'twas a-burnin' like fury, an' who sot it I do'no'; but I do know I don't 'cuse nobody er doin' it," he said, his nervous manner and trembling voice showing that he would gladly have had nothing to do with the matter. Pityingly he glanced toward Steubenreiser, his heart filled with genuine regret that he had allowed himself to listen to his neighbors' clamoring.



WITH HER LITTLE ARMS OUTSTRETCHED AS IF TO SCREEN HIM SHE
LOOKED AT DAN MARCY WITH FLASHING EYES *Page 209*

All this time Orlando had seemed to be utterly uninterested in the proceedings, but as he raised his eyes to glance at Martin Meers, something in the expression of the miller's face moved him to speak. Rising slowly, he looked first at Martin Meers, and then at Lawyer Everton; then he said, slowly and firmly:

"I neffer burnt it; I neffer burnt it, sir," and although he chose to remain standing, he seemed to have nothing further to say.

A slouching figure, at the far end of the room, arose, and pointing a grimy finger toward the German, shouted:

"*He* done it, Lawyer Everton! He sot fire to 't. I seen him, when I was a-goin' by there in the afternoon."

"You never, you *know* you never!"

It was Prue's little piping voice, and before her father dreamed of her intention, she had slipped from his knee and ran across the room to Orlando, where, leaning against him, with her little arms outstretched as if

to screen him, she looked at Dan Marcy with flashing eyes.

"You *never* saw him do it," she cried, "for he was in the lane all the afternoon with me, a-makin' me a pretty boat. I'd think you'd be 'fraid to tell such a naughty story."

Steubenreiser looked down in surprise at his tiny protector, and Dan Marcy stared open-mouthed at the child who had dared to contradict his statement. A hush followed, Orlando's accusers wondering if Prue were sure of what she was saying.

"Come to me, Prue," said the lawyer. "Steubenreiser is safe, if you are quite right in what you say."

"Every word she's said is true as preachin'," said Philury, rising, and as she excitedly flourished her umbrella, she was quite unaware that she had, with its hook handle, removed two hats from the heads of those who sat close behind her. The lawyer inclined his head, at the same time motioning for Philury to be seated.

"Now, my little girl," he said, taking Prue's chubby hand in his own, "you must tell me all about the afternoon and the boat which you say Orlando made for you. Is this it?" he asked, as he took from the table a graceful little craft, and held it so that Prue might examine it.

"Why, that's my boat; where did you get it?" she asked in surprise.

"Your father brought it here," was the reply. Then turning, he said:

"Tell me if anyone present thinks that he could make and finish as fine a little boat as this in an afternoon, and have time enough beside to admit of his walking two miles and a half to set a fire."

Then he turned to Prue, who leaned against his knee and eagerly scanned his face.

"You ain't going to let them hurt Orlando, *are* you?" she asked, and those who watched the German saw his face work painfully. It was evident that Prue's solicitude moved him as threats were power-

less to do. Very gently the stern lawyer questioned the little girl until she had told the whole story of the afternoon, from the commencing of work upon the little boat to the walk home in the twilight; of Orlando's placing the finished toy in her hands as he said, "Good-night," and of the red sky which they all saw from the doorway. Then the Squire and Randy vouched for all Prue had said, and Randy told of her meeting with Dan Marcy.

"Did Marcy say anything whatever to you of Steubenreiser?" questioned the lawyer.

Randy still stood beside her father, and her hand, as it lay upon his shoulder, trembled as she repeated the coward's words.

"He said, 'I shall land him in the county jail whether he fired the mill or not.'"

"That will do," said Lawyer Everton, "and now, Marcy, since you know so much about the matter, it is possible that you may know even more about it than we think."

Of course Dan Marcy at once loudly disclaimed all knowledge of the affair, but the lawyer so worried him with questions that he lost his bravado, and his defiant attitude changed to one of abject fear. He persistently contradicted his own statements, at first declaring that on the day of the fire he was in a town some miles distant, and a few moments later, in answer to judicial questioning, he came to the conclusion that he was on the farm which adjoined the mill property on that eventful afternoon. Marcy was a coward, and Lawyer Everton believed that he could be startled into an admission of some knowledge of the fire.

For a moment Dan Marcy and John Everton looked each other in the eye. Then suddenly the lawyer exclaimed:

“Marcy, did *you* fire the mill?”

“Wh—what—why, hoaw do ye——? Oh, Lawyer Everton, ye don’t mean ter ’nsinivate that ye think ’t I——”

The cowardly whine ended in a gasp, and

Jabez Brimblecom informed his next neighbor that he guessed John Everton had hit the nail on the head.

Marcy in his terror never dreamed that the lawyer's question, so bluntly asked, was but a shrewd man's guess at the truth, designed to force an admission. Further adroit questioning resulted in a confession which Dan Marcy made, hoping thereby to win favor with the lawyer and bespeak his clemency.

Then the hearing came to an abrupt ending, Marcy being hurried away in custody of the sheriff, and Orlando receiving congratulations without stint.

Martin Meers was the first to take him by the hand.

"I b'lieved in ye all 'long, Orlando," he said, "an' I guess we kin 'range ter hev ye work for me agin."

Orlando shook the proffered hand as he answered:

"I work for you the same as effer."

Two of his former fellow workmen greeted

him, and a third followed, ashamed to withhold his hand.

Prue's words went straight to his heart, as she said:

"I knew you was good, Orlando, and now *everybody* knows it."

"She is the best of all," he said, as he gently laid his hand upon her hair.

When once more out in the sunshine, Philury Flanders shrugged her shoulders and uttered a sigh of relief.

"I kin breathe once more naow I'm out of a roomful er men that's mean 'nough ter want ter persecoot 'n honest man," she said.

Randy and her father talked quietly of Orlando's acquittal, and Prue was so deeply impressed that she had little to say, but when she reached home she ran out to her swing, and as if to give vent to suppressed excitement, she sprang into it, and to a merry little tune she sang:

"Orlando's safe,
Orlando's safe,
I know it, know it, know it!"

The breeze blew her soft curls, as back and forth she flew as if on wings, and over and over she sang her odd little verse, ending it always triumphantly—

“I know it, know it, know it!”

CHAPTER XI

A COUNTRY WEDDING

SPRING had come, and Randy, standing by the window, looked out upon the budding trees and the warm sunlight, and laughed softly as she thought of Phoebe Small's prophecy, which she had uttered in the autumn with the assurance of an oracle.

“You'll find it pretty dull music to spend the winter at home after your fine times at Miss Dayton's lovely home in Boston. Last winter gay, and this winter stupid; the comparison will not be complimentary to our little town.”

Thus Phoebe had spoken, and now that the spring had come, she was obliged to confess that the season had been unusually gay, and that Randy, with her sweet face and cheerful, genial manner, had done much

toward making their little informal parties successful.

Philury, rollicking, kind-hearted Philury, had made it possible for Randy creditably to fill the position of housekeeper, and yet have leisure for countless good times, and for carefully, thoughtfully reading the fine books which Helen Dayton often sent to her.

With all the fun and frolic, Randy had been a sweet companion for her mother, finding time to read to her, and to go out with her on pleasant days, and now Mrs. Weston was once more her bright, energetic self.

"I owe it all to Randy," she said to her friends; "she's been a companion fer me, an' a chum for little Prue."

All this was true, and it was equally true that while Randy had enjoyed the winter, there had been some trying experiences which had taxed her patience and required a world of tact to meet.

Philury Flanders, the soul of good nature,

was, like most energetic persons, opinionated, and, while willing to work from sunrise to sunset, was determined to do it in *her* way.

“Ye ain’t experienced, Randy,” she would say, “an’ the way I’m a-doin’ this ’ere job is the *only* way ter do it.”

At such times it was vain for Randy to protest.

The winter’s pleasures had, however, far outweighed its little trials, and as she looked out across the fields, and saw the soft green appearing upon the trees which formed an arch over the winding road to the village, she thought of the sleighride over the same road, when the merry bells had played a tinkling accompaniment to laughter and song.

In her hand she held a letter from Jotham, which she had been reading, and as she thought of all which he had to tell, she caressed the little gold locket which hung from a ribbon about her throat.

“He is a true friend,” she thought, and

Phoebe Small, who entered without ceremony, exclaimed:

“You were dreaming, Randy, and I came to awaken you. What *do* you think? Mr. Blentmore has just sent me a catalogue of the great exhibition, and a letter, in which he says that his picture of me is hung in a fine light, and that there were crowds of people before it all the time. How I wish I could see it in its gold frame.”

“How fine to have everyone pleased with it,” said Randy. “I have just been reading a letter from Jotham. He has seen the picture, and he tells me that ‘although we admired it, we never dreamed of its genuine loveliness. Seen in its frame at Mr. Blentmore’s studio, and at the exhibition, it seems like Phoebe herself standing by the spring in the summer sunshine.’”

Phoebe was about to answer, when Mrs. Hodgkins drove up to the house and, hastily alighting, rushed in at the open door, exclaiming:

“How d’ye do, Randy? Where is yer

ma? Oh, I didn't notice ye, Phoebe, comin' in out'n the light. Haow be ye?

"Oh, here ye be, Mis' Weston. Wal, 'thout any prelim'naries I'll come ter the p'int, an' tell ye that I druv over ter say that Janie Clifton 's got a mil'nery openin', as she calls it, an' she said, 'Tell everybody ye meet;' an' says I, I will, an' also a few others that I'll have ter go aout er my way ter see, so I jest druv up here ter ask ye ef ye wouldn't like ter run daown ter the Centre an' see the hats an' bunnits, flaowers an' feathers, 'n all the new idees that Janie's a-showin'."

She paused for breath, and Phoebe grasped the opportunity to urge Randy to meet her early in the afternoon, when, together, they might proceed to the Centre and view the wonders of Janie Clifton's "opening."

Mrs. Weston had made plans for the afternoon which she felt that she could not set aside, and therefore decided that she would wait until another day to inspect the finery; but Randy and Phoebe felt that their en-

thusiasm would not permit them to postpone their call at Janie's store, and early in the afternoon Randy hastened along the road in an endeavor to be prompt in keeping her appointment with Phoebe. Prue accompanied her, skipping beside her, and cheerily singing:

“ We're going to see the bunnits,
The bunnits, bunnits, bunnits.”

At the bridge she insisted upon pausing to drop tiny green leaves into the water, in order to have the pleasure of watching them float upon the surface and disappear under the bridge.

“ Come, Prue, hurry, or we shall be so late that Phoebe will think that we are not coming,” urged Randy.

“ Well, if those leaves would hurry, *I'd* hurry, too,” Prue replied, “ but they just poke.”

“ And we are surely poking,” Randy replied, amused that Prue should make the floating leaves an excuse for loitering.

They reached the place of appointment, a great rock which stood by the roadside, in the shadow of the trees, just as Phoebe's patience was waning, and together they hurried along the road, and Phoebe was all smiles, since Randy had not disappointed her.

Mrs. Small had given Phoebe permission to choose a hat for herself, saying:

"Get what pleases you, only don't go above the price I've named," and the money had burned her pocket while she had sat upon the rock, impatiently waiting for Randy.

Mrs. Weston very naturally preferred to choose her own bonnet, but she had told Randy to select hats for herself and Prue, and Prue had asserted that she was big enough to choose for herself.

The little millinery "parlor" was crowded with those who came to purchase, and as many more who only called to inspect the stock, and to see what their friends and neighbors bought.

Randy's choice was quickly made, one of the first hats which she tried on having pleased her. Prue was more difficult, insisting upon standing on a chair that she might see the glass, and trying on many of the hats, finally choosing one designed for some tall young woman to wear.

"That is hardly suitable for a little girl," said Janie Clifton, laughing merrily at Prue, who tipped her head from side to side, thus endeavoring to see the hat at all angles. It was a "picture" hat, a huge affair, with masses of large red roses heaped upon it.

After much persuasion, Prue was induced to accept one with a wreath of tiny rosebuds about the crown, and although she sighed for the showy blossoms, she concluded that "p'raps Randy knew best."

Phoebe chose a hat which was adorned with poppies, but she wished to have a slight alteration in the arrangement of the flowers, and while Janie was making the desired change in the trimming, her assistant talked with other customers, and the girls enjoyed

the fun of listening to the comments of the crowd which filled the room. Not the least forcible of these were Mrs. Hodgkins' remarks:

"Where's Janie Clifton?" she demanded, as the clerk approached her.

The girl informed her that Miss Clifton was busy trimming, adding:

"I am assisting her to-day. What can I show you?"

"Do'no', 'm sure," remarked Mrs. Hodgkins coolly. "I can't tell ye what ter show me, 'cause I do'no' what I want myself, though I'll tell ye one thing ye *needn't* show me, an' that's a bunnit; fer I won't hev it. I've worn bunnits all my life, an' naow I want a hat, an' a showy one, too."

The girl brought several for her inspection, but although some were quite gaudy, Mrs. Hodgkins would have none of them, declaring them, each and all, too quiet for her taste. Suddenly she espied the large hat with the red roses, which had delighted Prue. Taking it in her hand, she exclaimed:

"There, young woman, I'll take that one, ef ye'll put a leetle more trimmin' on it."

The girl saw that her customer was a determined woman, so she wisely refrained from mentioning that the hat was already elaborately trimmed.

"Miss Clifton agrees to make any alteration which a customer orders," she answered quietly. So in addition to the large red roses already on the hat, Mrs. Hodgkins chose a cluster of equally large yellow blossoms, and a soft pink feather pompon, in the center of which some stiff little stems stood smartly erect, their ends tipped with crystal beads. Evidently Mrs. Hodgkins intended to create an impression at church on Sunday.

Janie Clifton knew that Saturday was a busy day for the housekeeper, yet she deliberately chose it for her "opening," because she believed that many women would rush through their work in order to buy a new hat for Sunday, and that the school holiday would permit the girls to call and be

tempted by her exhibition of fascinating millinery.

Mrs. Hodgkins had told her husband to call for her in season to pay her bill, and just as the saleswoman came from the little trimming room with the gorgeous hat, Mr. Hodgkins strolled in at the open door and crossed the room to where his wife was sitting.

“Wal, did ye find something ter suit ye?” he asked. “Seems ef most of ’em is pooty gay.”

“What! ye *didn’t* buy *that*!” he exclaimed, the look of consternation upon his meek face causing Randy and Phoebe to turn their heads away and frantically endeavor to stifle their laughter. The girls were partially hidden by a large form hung with many hats, and thus were unobserved.

Mrs. Hodgkins gazed at the hat, then at her husband, and smartly said:

“Certainly, I did buy that hat, an’ I bought it ter wear ter meetin’. I’ve worn

bunnits all my life, an' I made up my mind that *this* time 'twould be a hat."

"Wal, I don't s'pose there's any reason why ye shouldn't wear one ef ye want ter, but I don't see 't ye need 'a' felt called ter hev a bucketful er flowers tied on top, an' a jigglin' feather a wiggle-wagglin' ter boot."

"Naow, let me tell ye," Mrs. Hodgkins responded, with commendable patience, "fer years 'n years I've worn bunnits in gray an' black or braown, an' then, fer variety, I've chose braown, er black, er gray, an' I'm tired er the dull ol' things. This time I've got red, an' pink, an' yaller, an' I *like* it, but I was that des'prit, I'd a bought it ef I'd er *hated* it; jest fer a change."

Her husband regarded her curiously for a moment, then he said, kindly:

"I'm glad ye bought it, ef ye like it, an' I do'no 's I'd object ef ye thought even naow that a bit er green an' purple hitched to it somewheres would comfort ye."

Mrs. Hodgkins was mollified, and to-

gether they left the store, Mr. Hodgkins placidly smiling as he thought of his wife's delight in her purchase, and the good woman carrying her parcel as if it were a fragile thing which might be crushed in transportation.

The sale of millinery had been a success, and Janie's customers had not been limited to residents of her own town. The news that she had been "'prenticed to a Boston mill'ner" had traveled far and wide, with the result that the little store could boast a long list of patrons from surrounding villages.

Janie had been very busy getting ready for her "opening," and her dressmaking department had been equally "rushed." Her friends had thought it delightful to make little calls at her "parlors," and catch a glimpse of gowns which were being made, and to quiz Janie as to whom they would eventually adorn. There seemed to be a great mystery in regard to a certain set of dresses upon which she was at work, for,

tease as they would, not one of her friends could elicit so much as a hint of the name of the one for whom they were intended.

“Ye tell us who ordered all these other gaowns, Janie, so I can’t see why ye’re so amazin’ private ’baout these,” said one caller, a girl whom Janie Clifton never had liked.

“It don’t make any odds what I *have* told ye,” Janie replied; “this happens ter be one thing I *haven’t* told ye,” and the inquisitive one was obliged to depart with her curiosity unsatisfied, and Janie worked upon the pretty things with renewed energy.

Her silence regarding the completed gowns rendered her curious friends and neighbors desperate; but one day the mystery was solved.

Cards were out announcing that Joel Simpkins and Janie Clifton were to be married at the little parish church, and although the date named was an early one, there were many who thought that they could with difficulty wait for the evening to arrive.

Invitations were sent to a sufficient number of relatives, intimate friends, neighbors, and even acquaintances to fill the church completely, and all the uninvited determined to be present, a solid phalanx to surround the little portico and catch a glimpse of the bride.

Joel and Janie had made their plans for the wedding without asking advice from their respective families, or following that which was not only offered, but thrust upon them.

“Ye’d orter be kind er keerful, an’ econom’cal when ye’re startin’ aout; ’nvitin’ the hull taown is reel ’stravagant,” remarked Janie’s cousin Kate, who considered herself competent upon all occasions to give advice.

“Havin’ yer weddin’ in the evenin’ makes ye pay fer lightin’ the meetin’ haouse; folks as hopes ter ’cumerlate has got ter commence *sometime*,” remarked the elder Simpkins.

Still Janie and Joel kept their own coun-

sel, neither accepting nor rejecting the suggestions so freely offered, until one day Joel, utterly tired of evading questions, made an announcement which aroused the wrath of his brother Timotheus, and caused the other members of his family to look upon him with marked disfavor.

“Who be ye goin’ ter hev ter stand up with ye? ’t’ough there’s no sense in my askin’ ye,” remarked old Mr. Simpkins, “fer ye’d hev ter hev yer brother, fer the name of it.”

“I’ve already ’nvited my cousin ’Liph’let Lamson ter be best man at my weddin’,” said Joel, and then he tilted his chair against the wall and waited for the torrent of disapproval which he knew would descend upon him.

Words could hardly describe the disgust which his announcement had engendered, and when at last he found an opportunity to speak, he said:

“Wal, ye needn’t be so stirred up ’baout it. I asked ’Liph’let ’cause he’s been ter

lots er weddin's an' knows haow ter do the thing right. Timotheus ain't ever been ter one, an' might act green."

In his indignation Timotheus made a reply which silenced his elder brother.

"Seein' 's ye ain't been married before, I shouldn't wonder ef ye 'peared a *leetle* gawky yerself," he said.

It was true that Timotheus Simpkins had not the least idea of the duties which as "best man" would have devolved upon him, but there was one point about which he held a decided opinion—that his brother Joel had shown marked disrespect in asking his cousin instead of his brother to fill the important position.

The more he thought about it, the more incensed he became.

"I shan't attend Joel's weddin', bein's he see fit ter slight me," he said. When this speech reached Joel's ears he spoke forcibly:

"Wal, I s'pose Timotheus kin do as he likes. One thing is settled, my cousin 'Liph'let 'll be the best man."

Then Timotheus at once decided to leave home before the day set for the wedding, and although his father expostulated, and his mother coaxed, he remained firm, and early one morning he stood upon the platform at the little station, an old-fashioned valise in one hand, and a large umbrella in the other. His scant wardrobe occupied one-half of the valise, a quantity of paper and quill pens filled the other. Someone had informed Timotheus that poets always used quills when giving vent to their fancy.

“Goin’ away somewheres, Timotheus?” queried the station agent.

“Yes, I *be*,” was the curt reply; “I’m goin’ West ter stay fer a spell with my uncle. There’s more room aout there, I’m told; the country an’ the folks ain’t so narrer as they be here, an’ there’s some chance er bein’ ’dressed as mister, once in a while, ef ye look imposin’.”

“Sho!” remarked the listener; then as Timotheus said “Good-by” and boarded the train, the agent whistled softly, and

said: "Queer critter, I vum ef he isn't! Wonder ef they ever seen anything like him aout West?"

Philury Flanders had been very proud and happy to announce that she had been especially honored by Janie.

"I'm ter stand up with Janie, Mis' Weston," she exclaimed; "think er that! 'N I went daown ter try my dress on yesterday, 'n I must say I looked so fine in it that I paraded back'ards an' for'ards in front er Janie's glass 'til she laughed like fury.

"'Laugh!' says I, 'for I don't mind yer laughin'; this gaown's a leetle ahead er anything I've seen fer one while, an' I want ter git a bit used ter it 'fore I wear it ter the weddin'. Sakes alive! But it's got 'nough trimmin' onto it ter turn any girl's head.'"

A wedding in the town was always an event which formed a theme for gossip for weeks, and even months. As a rule, the twain repaired to the parsonage and, eschewing anything so extravagant as a wed-

ding journey, at once "settled down" to the everyday life of the farm.

Judge, then, the excitement a church wedding would incite, especially when it was learned that the happy pair were to take a trip to Boston.

Mrs. Weston had decided that her best black silk would do very nicely if a fresh lace collar were added, but she chose a charming gown for Randy, saying:

"I want ye should look fine at the wedding, Randy, an' the gaown 'll come in handy afterwards."

The Babson girls were greatly excited over the new dresses which their father had given them permission to order, and the Langham twins were placidly happy in the possession of frocks made exactly alike. While the other girls talked freely of their anticipation of the wedding, and the finery which they were to wear, Phoebe Small remained reticent.

"Goin' ter 'stonish the natives, I expect," remarked Dot Marvin; "that's why she

won't say what she's goin' ter wear," but even this speech did not tempt Phoebe to tell the style or color of her gown, and curiosity regarding it increased accordingly.

It seemed as if the evening named for the ceremony would never come, but like all anticipated dates, it did at last arrive, and never was there a lovelier evening.

The tiny church was literally packed with invited guests, and scores of curious villagers crowded about the entrance, and greeted the new arrivals with remarks regarding their personal appearance.

"There's the Langham gals, as like as two peas in a pod. I can't never tell t'other from which."

"Oh, look at Phoebe Small! Ain't her gaown the beater-ee!"

"There's Randy Weston! The Squire's darter's the beauty er the hull batch."

Inside, the little church was all light and cheer, and the expectant guests were eagerly awaiting the happy pair. The society had never owned an organ, but Mrs. Gray had

loaned her piano, and had also promised Janie that she would play.

The wedding party was late, but just as Mrs. Gray, for the sixth time commenced the introduction to the "Wedding March," they entered, and promptly every head was turned toward the door. Joel's cousin had asked by whom the bride was to be given away, and had been curtly informed by the groom that "she was a-goin' ter give herself away, of course," therefore he had not questioned further.

Just as he entered the church it occurred to Joel that he did not know whether he, with Janie, should precede the others up the aisle, or if 'Liph'let and Philury should lead the way. He paused to ask his cousin, failed to hear his reply, got out of step with Janie, and finally strode up the aisle, his bride-to-be obliged to take three steps to every one of his, in order to prevent Joel's reaching the altar alone.

Eliphalet and Philury followed at a rapid pace, the latter hiding her face in her

bouquet until she could stifle her laughter.

Janie Clifton never looked sweeter than in her wedding gown of white muslin, and Philury, who had been her dearest friend at school, was fairly resplendent in a rose-colored muslin with ribbons of the same hue.

Joel Simpkins was much taller than Janie, while buxom Philury towered above the "best man," whose stout figure and florid complexion failed to win her approval.

Parson Spooner beamed upon the couple before him, and all went well until the point in the ceremony was reached where the ring should be forthcoming.

Joel turned to his cousin, who had promised to take charge of it, but Eliphalet was thrusting his fingers into one pocket after another, flushing painfully as his search failed to produce the ring.

Janie nervously plucked at her bouquet, Joel scowled, Philury with difficulty refrained from giggling, when suddenly up

came the ring from a pocket which had already been searched three times, and upon the floor it dropped, and commenced to roll. With a tremendous effort Eliphalet stooped, and as he wildly clutched it, he forgot time or place, and ejaculated:

“ I’ve *got* ye! ”

Was it strange that a ripple of suppressed merriment swept over the assembled company?

When, however, the ring was placed upon Janie’s finger, and Parson Spooner had blessed the happy pair, they proceeded down the aisle with a deal of dignity, even the irrepressible Philury walking beside Eliphalet apparently serene, but inwardly wondering if among his long list of cousins, Joel could have found one less charming than this most awkward of men.

An informal reception followed the ceremony, and as the Clifton homestead was small, the invitations were limited to intimate friends of the bride and groom. Many of the uninvited lingered for a short time at

the church to chat with friends and comment upon the wedding.

“Janie looked pooty ’nough,” remarked an angular female, “but Philury Flanders was what I call bloomin’.”

“I didn’t pay much ’tention ter the gals,” said Josiah Boyden; “but I thought I’d seen Joel look full ’s well in his everyday coat as he did in them store clothes.”

“That ere ‘*best man*,’ as they called him, ’though I don’t see as he was any better than Joel, was what I call a reg’lar gawky. I guess Timotheus could have done better ’n ter drop that ring an’ have ter dive daown onto the floor an’ pick it up,” said a young farmer, to which Jabez Brimblecom replied:

“Wal, it all come er tryin’ ter git up a turrible high-toned weddin’. When my wife an’ I was married we didn’t hev no trottin’ up ter the pulpit an’ prancin’ back ag’in, no ‘best man,’ nor no girl with a hull mess er ribbons an’ a bokay. We jest went ter the minister’s haouse, an’ in five minutes we

were as surely married as ef we'd had a high-falutin' time; 'though ef they're any happier fer all the fuss an' feathers, why, I'm glad they had it."

"I guess we all wish them happiness an' good luck," said Mrs. Brimblecom; and the little party separated, its members going to their homes, their hearts filled with thoughts of the fortunate couple who were to travel "as far as Boston."

Jemima and Belinda Babson talked the wedding over long after they should have been asleep.

"An' Phoebe's dress was changeable silk," said Belinda; "an' Mis' Hodgkins says it was her ma's weddin' gown made over," but the remark was quite lost upon Jemima, who was already asleep.

CHAPTER XII

THE VILLAGE GOSSIP

FOR a few days the gossips amused themselves with discussing the details of the wedding. Those who had been present described things as they were, while the uninvited relied entirely upon their imagination, and if the numberless tales told by the village newsmongers failed to agree, there was, at least, unlimited variety.

After a time, however, the excitement abated, and many an older person felt as Prue did, although few so frankly expressed the thought.

“Joel and Janie got married, and had a big wedding, and everybody was there and had a fine time. Now, why don’t somebody else do something? I like something to be happening all the time,” she said.

It is a peculiar fact that in a quiet little

village a small event makes a great stir, and in the calm which follows, the place seems more placid than ever before.

Only Mrs. Hodgkins clung firmly to the "weddin'" as a theme for conversation. She could not bear to relinquish it until another event should provide a new topic.

"I've asked Mis' Clifton ef Janie 'n Joel is goin' further 'n Boston, an she says 'no,' 'n I asked her ef Janie is goin' ter give up her dressmakin' an' mill'nery, an' she says 'no' ag'in, an' says I, 'then she's a-goin' on with them?' an she says 'yes,' an' ye can't get nothin' out 'n her but 'no' 'n 'yes,' no matter what ye ask, er haow ye ask it. I don't like ter see folks so turrible secretin'. Why can't she speak aout an' tell a few things without waitin' ter be pumped? I must confess she riles me."

"Perhaps Janie asked her mother not to say anything about her plans while she is away," said Mrs. Weston, gently, thus hoping to defend Mrs. Clifton, but Mrs. Hodgkins was not to be pacified.

“Wal, Janie ’d be queer ’nough ef she did that. After the way we’ve all patronized her, I should think we had a right ter be ’lowed ter show an int’reest in her, an’ know a few of her plans. I know *one* thing, I’ve asked Barnes haow long they’ll be away, an’ he says he gave Joel ’til a fortnight come Tuesday ter git back ter the store, an’ old Mr. Simpkins says their weddin’ trip ’ll caount up pooty nigh ont’ a hundred an’ twenty-five dollars, as nigh as he can figger it, caountin’ in the wages Joel loses whilst he’s gone, an’ Janie’s time lost from her sewin’ an’ mill’nery. I call that jest fearful extravagant, don’t you?”

Mrs. Hodgkins asked the question as if she felt sure that Mrs. Weston would agree with her, but at that moment Philury appeared in the doorway, and thus it remained unanswered.

“We’re all aout er bakin’ sody, Mis’ Weston, an’ I can’t git Prue ter do the arrant,” said Philury, her flushed face showing exasperation.

"Why, how strange!" said Randy. "Prue is usually delighted to go down to the store."

"I'll speak to her," said Mrs. Weston. She wondered why her little daughter was unwilling to do the errand, but when she reached the door the reason was evident.

Johnny Buffum sat upon one end of the doorstep, and Hi Babson on the other. They were scowling at each other, while Prue, her chubby hands clasped behind her back, seemed waiting for some momentous point to be settled.

"Now, Johnny," she said; "you 'n Hi 'll have to be nice to each other, and stop looking cross, else I won't let *either* of you go down to the store with me."

"I got two cents ter buy *lickerish* with," said Johnny, with the air of one who is bidding for favor.

"I got *three* cents, an' that 'll buy three papers er pink *losengers*," declared Hi, thus offering a better bid.

Admonished by her mother to go at once to the store, she said:

“But ’tain’t p’lite to leave ’em here, and they won’t both be nice and go, too.”

“Naow, Prue, you must go at once an’ do the arrant fer Philury,” said Mrs. Weston; then, turning to the two small boys, she said:

“Hi, you ’n Johnny jest step along, one each side er Prue, an’ as she’s got some pennies, when ye git ter the store ye can *all* buy what ye like, an’ come back here an’ set daown under the apple tree in the shade and enjoy yer treat. Come, step lively!”

Slowly the two little cavaliers arose from the step, and down the path from the doorway they trudged, the sweet prospect of unlimited “losengers,” “lickerish,” and Prue’s companionship causing them to forget their little dispute, and they turned their smiling faces toward the Centre.

While at the door Mrs. Weston urged Prue to hasten to the store, Mrs. Hodgkins, alone with Randy, grasped the opportunity

to ask a few questions which she believed would be truthfully answered.

“Is that painter feller comin’ back ter the Smalls’ this summer ter set raound an’ sketch?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Randy.

Mrs. Hodgkins’ next question was more personal.

“Is Phoebe gettin’ letters from him, do ye know? Some say she is.”

“I think Phoebe would not wish me to say,” Randy answered, while she heartily wished that her mother would come back, and so turn Mrs. Hodgkins’ attention, that she would forget to question farther.

“Wal, wal!” ejaculated Mrs. Hodgkins; “I do’no’ why she should be so tremenjous quiet ’baout it. She seemed ter be jest tickled ter death when he talked ter her. I didn’t know but she’d hev a kerniption fit ef he actooally writ her a letter; but of course ye can’t tell ef she’s told ye not ter. Yer what I call reel honorable ter keep close what ye ain’t s’pected ter tell, an’ I think

well of ye for 't, but at times I wish yer was jest a *leetle* bit newsy."

Randy sat looking down at her pretty hands as they lay in her lap.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hodgkins," she said; "but I can't tell what was told me in confidence."

Mrs. Hodgkins leaned forward and laid her hard hand upon Randy's as she said:

"There, there, Randy, of course ye can't, an' I think well of ye fer sayin' so. Ef Phoebe tells ye her little secrets, ye do well ter keep 'em; but there's *one* thing ye wouldn't mind tellin', an' as I'm sure ye know it, I'll thank ye to tell me.

"*Do* the Marvin's use braown sugar er white? Not that *I* care ter know, but Almiry says 'braown', an' Mis' Jenks says 'white', an' I ain't been daown ter Barnes' ter ask. Silas 'd be sure ter know, bein' 's he sells ter 'em. Hev ye ever noticed which they bought when ye've been at the store?"

The anxious expression upon her face would have impressed one with the idea that

Mrs. Hodgkins' life hung in the balance while she waited for an answer.

"I've not the least idea what the Marvins buy," said Randy, and in her heart she thought, "and I would not tell you if I knew."

Just at this point Mrs. Weston returned, and a lengthy chat regarding a new cook-book which Silas Barnes was selling so completely held Mrs. Hodgkins' attention that she forgot that the question as to which kind of sugar the Marvins used had not yet been settled.

"Naow, I think I'm apt ter git my pie-crust too dry, usin' the flaour with a heavy hand, so ter speak, an' I b'lieve I'll try usin' more water 'n less lard, an'——" But again Philury appeared in the doorway.

"Prue's got back with the sody, Mis' Weston, an' here's a letter she brought from the office; I think they're kinder resky givin' letters to a child, don't you?" she asked.

"It does seem so; though Prue's trusty," Mrs. Weston answered.

“Open yer letter,” said Mrs. Hodgkins; “don’t mind *me*. I’d jest as soon ye’d read it as not.”

In truth she felt that she could not terminate her call until that letter had been read. She would stay just long enough to learn whence it came, and what news it contained.

“It is from yer Aunt Prudence, Randy,” said Mrs. Weston.

“She’s coming back to us in a few weeks, and she says, ‘Tell Randy that I’m glad to hear what a fine housekeeper she’s been, and when I reach the farm I’ll see that she has leisure for all the pleasure she can crowd into next winter.

“‘Philury and I can keep things humming, and Randy shall be as free as she chooses.’”

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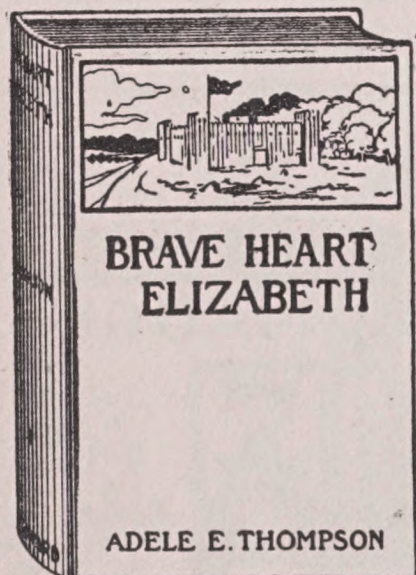
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